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Review Essay

KISHORE'S WORLD

Donald K. Emmerson

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Kishore Mahbubani is well known and well credentialed. The widely published dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore has been listed among the “top 100 global thinkers” by *Foreign Policy* magazine not once but thrice—in 2005, 2010, and 2011. In praising one of Mahbubani’s books, Harvard professor Larry Summers stated that “there is no more thoughtful observer of Asia, the United States, and their interaction than Kishore Mahbubani.”¹

Despite this renown, Mahbubani’s world—the view of global affairs that his many writings convey—has not received the breadth of analytic attention that it would appear to deserve. Books about Mahbubani and his world by authors other than himself do not, to my knowledge, exist. Nor is a Google search for “articles about Kishore Mahbubani” especially productive. His website displays “Recent Articles About Me” and “Past Articles About Me.” But many of these pieces mention his work only in passing or convey his opinions more or less uncritically in interviews. For a commentator as prominent as Mahbubani, reviews of his ideas are regrettably sparse.

Critiques of some of his opinions have, of course, appeared. His first book expressed his conviction that “the aggressive Western promotion of democracy, human rights and freedom of the press to the Third World at the end of the Cold War was, and is, a colossal mistake.”² This remark and its related defense of “Asian values” were sharply criticized by another widely read author, Ian Buruma, who would later join Mahbubani on *Foreign Policy*’s list of the “top 100 global thinkers” in 2010.³

In his response to Buruma, Mahbubani accused Western liberals of viewing the world in either-or terms: “free or unfree, open or closed, totalitarian or democratic.” He defended his book as challenging “this black and white perspective,” as offering “a non-Western worldview in a world dominated by a Western *Weltanschauung*.” “I do not believe,” replied Buruma with Singapore in mind, that being “free to do business but not to criticize the government is the best way to conduct political affairs, and what is more, nor do most Asians.” Buruma cited democratizing demands and trends in Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. He admitted that Singapore might be an exception, but added “I would like to hear that from Singaporean citizens, in a free press, and not from an official government scribe”—a swipe at Mahbubani’s status at the time as his country’s ambassador to the United Nations.⁴

Mahbubani is not above casting his own aspersions, as in this recent unconditional accusation: “Americans cannot understand what is happening in Asia.” Or this one: “Whenever the EU gets a chance, it slaps Asia in the face.” Or this one: “America never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”⁵ But if such remarks seem at best impolite, he makes no apology for them. Quite the contrary: “Asians are too polite. Sometimes it takes a relatively rude Asian, like me, to express our continent’s true feelings.”⁶ Unable as I am to fathom the “true feelings” of more than four-billion people, I cannot know whether they feel they are living in Mahbubani’s world or not. Nor, for lack of time and space, am I able to explore fully here the extent to which reality validates the opinions that he conveys or the praise and prominence that he enjoys. My purpose is merely to highlight, and at least to begin to assess, some of the assumptions, arguments, and concepts that animate his burgeoning *oeuvre* as they are manifested in his recent writings, especially with reference to democracy and human rights and to the Southeast Asian region where he lives.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s “Mistake”

Aung San Suu Kyi, after having withstood more than two decades of intermittent personal and political repression at the hands of Burma’s misruling generals, including fifteen years spent in detention, was released from house arrest in November 2010. In June 2012, she traveled to Europe. She visited Switzerland, Norway, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and France. In Oslo, she accepted the Nobel Peace Prize that her confinement had prevented her from receiving in person in 1991.

Suu Kyi’s trip had barely begun when an op-ed by Mahbubani called her judgment into question. The title of the piece summarized its author’s advice: “The Lady should look to Asia not Europe.” Mahbubani began by assuring his readers that in view of her lengthy harassment by

the junta and her courageous refusal to bend to its will, “no one should begrudge Ms Suu Kyi the royal treatment she is receiving in Europe. Yet,” he continued, “as she walks through the admiring throngs, she should heed the wisdom of victorious Roman generals, who when parading through Rome supposedly had a slave to whisper in their ear ‘remember you are mortal.’ They were reminded that they could make mistakes. And Ms Suu Kyi could make serious errors in Europe.”⁷

Thus did Mahbubani liken a brave woman who had endured decades of repression by Burmese generals to a Roman general in need of a slave to caution against megalomania. The image was more than begrudging; it was patronizing. Forget Europe, he advised: “The regional organisation that can truly help Myanmar is the Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN], not the EU.” He himself forgot to note that Brussels, where the European Union is headquartered, was not even on her itinerary, or that, unlike ASEAN, the EU had actually supported her struggle for democracy and human rights. Perhaps it did not occur to him that she might have wanted to thank those who had actually helped and honored her during her persecution.

Suu Kyi’s engagements in Europe included speaking to the International Labor Organization’s annual assembly in Geneva, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in person in Oslo, and addressing the British Parliament in London. Mahbubani ignored all of her engagements save one, and that one he dismissed: “Attending a U2 concert in Dublin,” he warned, would not bring “hope” to “her people.” For that to happen, “Ms Suu Kyi may have to change her mental maps. She has to look at Asian case studies and not attend European concerts.”

Mahbubani’s readers could be forgiven for concluding that Suu Kyi had succumbed to frivolity in Dublin—that instead of doing something serious that might have brought hope to the people of her country she had indulged her personal taste as a fan of U2. The falsity of that conclusion relied on the selectivity of Mahbubani’s own “mental map,” for he had failed even to allude to the true purpose of the event in Dublin. It was not “a U2 concert.” It was a gathering of human-rights-minded activists, celebrities, and musicians, including U2, who spoke and performed in her honor. She was there to receive in person the Ambassador of Conscience Award that Amnesty International had conferred on her in Dublin three years before. Her acceptance speech was a high point of the night, and the link to U2 was through its lead singer, Bono, the humanitarian activist-cum-philanthropist who had for years campaigned for her freedom and the freedom of political prisoners in Burma.

In Mahbubani’s world, Suu Kyi was wrong to have visited Europe. Europe, to him, is “a deeply wounded continent” whose people “are frightened for their own future. *Saving others is their last priority*, no matter how noble the cause.” In fact, proceeds from the supposedly “me-first” Europeans and others who gathered in Dublin were set to be

spent on improving the health and education of the Burmese people and advancing human rights in Burma and elsewhere.

Nor does it help his contention that Suu Kyi had cold-shouldered Asia, and especially Southeast Asia, to know another fact missing from his essay: that her European tour was her *second* trip outside Burma following her release from detention. She had traveled first to Thailand—Burma’s Asian neighbor and a founding member of the very ASEAN that Mahbubani implied she had ignored. As for his implication that she had disregarded Asian economic growth while focusing on Western human rights, he also failed to note that in Bangkok, where ASEAN was born, she had addressed hundreds of Asian and other business executives and officials at the 21st World Economic Forum on East Asia. In her speech, she acknowledged Thailand’s impressive economic development and urged her audience to create jobs in Burma by investing there.

In his advice to Suu Kyi, Mahbubani pitted Asia against Europe in stunningly Manichean fashion: “All the models for Myanmar to grow and succeed are in Asia. None are in Europe.”⁸ In this either-or judgment, Asia’s record of rapid economic growth was compelling enough to render Europe’s achievement of liberal democracy completely irrelevant—an astonishing position to hold in light of the urgency of political reform in Burma as it emerges from a militarized past that has not been fully overcome.

The Few and the Many

Accolades such as “brilliant” (Nouriel Roubini), “full of wisdom” (Pascal Lamy), and “always intelligent” (Fareed Zakaria) adorn the back jacket of Mahbubani’s fourth and latest book, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (to which the parenthetical page references in this essay refer), published by PublicAffairs in 2013. Its title is also encouraging. Insofar as a “great convergence” implies a major *narrowing* of differences, it should augur relief from a crudely black and white “mental map” of Europe as useless and Asia as exemplary. Instead, the book enlarges these continental toponyms into an even more sweeping and Procrustean dichotomization of “the West” versus “the Rest”—his signature meme from earlier work.⁹

In *Convergence*, the binary division is cast in demographic terms: the 12 percent of humanity that are labeled “the West” versus the 88 percent that make up “the Rest.” This statistical divergence, to which *Convergence* returns again and again, is a key to understanding the majoritarian yet elitist character of Mahbubani’s world, geared as it is to allocating power democratically between states while ignoring the presence or absence of democracy inside them.

Mahbubani’s majoritarianism is expressed in his confidence in the UN General Assembly, with its one-state-one-vote rule, as a place for

conversation between the 12 percent and the 88 percent. “As more and more global issues come our way, we need to find out quickly and in one venue what the 7 billion inhabitants of the planet want” (p. 249). Intriguing in this context is his proposal that the General Assembly be automatically convened to discuss any Security Council resolution that has been vetoed by one of the latter’s permanent members. It is nevertheless unclear why one should rely on the rulers of the UN’s 193 member countries, of which 104 have been classified by Freedom House as either Not Free (47) or only Partly Free (57), to articulate accurately, let alone “quickly,” what “7 billion people” want.

States are the ineluctable building blocks of Mahbubani’s world—its constituent bricks or, more aptly given his attention to the 88 percent, its BRICS. Yet he wants “the voices and interests of each human being” to be “represented equally well in key global institutions.” His solution, however, is not to encourage democracy within countries to ensure that their governments articulate those voices and represent their interests. It is for “the West” to stop dominating “the Rest” and to allow the latter’s leaders to head those global institutions. By implication, obstructionist “Western societies”—unlike those of “the Rest”—do not want “a just, legitimate, and democratic global order” (p. 119).

Cases in point for Mahbubani include the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). So “tightly controlled” by “the West” are the Bank and the OECD that their evaluations cannot be trusted (p. 201). The “best thing” that could happen to “the narrow and self-serving club” that is the OECD is its liquidation. Its resources could then be spent “set[ting] up think tanks and schools of public policy in the developing world” (p. 203). One may wonder whether OECD members Chile, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey, diverse and dispersed as they are, realize that they belong to a “narrow and self-serving club” of “Western” countries that deserves liquidation.

Mahbubani’s asperity toward the “12 percent” does not make him a cheerleader for mass planetary rule by the “88 percent.” Elite leadership is the key to his vision. The world as he sees it is a “boat”—that is, a huge ship—with 193 cabins. Each one houses the population of a single UN-member country. (Presumably Taiwan’s 23 million are in China’s cabin or on the deck awaiting a room of their own.) Each cabin has a captain and a crew who claim sole dominion within its walls. Out on the ocean, currents are changing. Storms loom. “None of us” would sail into such turbulence without “a capable captain and crew at the helm of our boat. Yet the global policy community proposes to do exactly that” (p. 3).

What does this, the central metaphor of *Convergence*, imply? It could mean that the entire global policy community, minus Mahbubani himself, cherishes the absolute sovereignty of individual states and proposes to sail into danger with that Westphalian condition intact. That is false;

internationalism exists. Or he means to condemn that same global policy community, again presumably minus himself, for refusing to satisfy the obvious desire of everyone—all “of us”—for a global government under the command of *one* capable captain and crew. That, too, is false; nationalism exists. Or perhaps Mahbubani would overthrow the global policy community and replace it with world federalists. That is unrealistic if not also unwise. Or he would avoid the conflict between what regular folks want and what the policy wonks propose by having the ship drop its anchor in the hope that the storms ahead will pass it by. That is unrealistic and unwise.

In Mahbubani’s world, elitism and populism collide: In order to survive, humanity should submit to a supremely talented would-be twenty-first-century Jade Emperor who is recruited meritocratically. One can imagine the leader’s name being drawn from a list of the top-scoring graduates of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and other such schools that would be funded by the disencumbered budget of a defunct OECD. But how can such a top-down, selective, talent-driven process proceed and succeed by politically valorizing the massive “Rest” against the miniscule “West”? If the world is an imperiled ship in urgent need of elite-expert authority—a master navigator—is there really an 88 percent solution to its predicament that is meritocratic rather than populist? Feeding these doubts is Mahbubani’s own curious assertion that the Chinese Communist Party is “as meritocratic as Harvard University.”¹⁰ Unless I am mistaken, Harvard does not have a propaganda department charged with maintaining ideological purity, censoring speech, and punishing heresy in its classrooms—terms of reference and recruitment that hardly value individual ability, unless it be the ability to obey.

Convergence is least tendentious and most constructive on the subject of UN Security Council reform. Mahbubani wants to enlarge its membership from 10 to 21. His “7-7-7” formula envisages 7 permanent members with the right of veto; 7 veto-less members elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms from a list of 28 “middle powers” of significant demographic and economic size; and 7 also veto-less members that the General Assembly would periodically choose from the pool of the 179 remaining states (pp. 240–46).¹¹ The proposal is unrealistic, but at least it bridges the central polemical rift in Mahbubani’s world between “the West” and “the Rest”—though not entirely. While noting with good reason that “the main obstacle to UN reform lies in Washington,” he downplays the opposition of China (p. 243).¹²

Convergence or Confusion?

In *The Great Convergence*, Mahbubani never explicitly or consistently defines the phenomenon that gives the book its title. Numerous allusions to it are made, of course, but readers are left wondering what

the author means. Are globalization and convergence synonymous? If convergence is teleological, what is its destination? Is the endpoint stationary or moving, and if it is moving, in which direction is it going? Are the “developing” and “developed” economies converging upward on the latter’s affluence, or are they meeting somewhere in the middle? Is the world moving toward transnational standards, political union, or common beliefs and behaviors—global governance, global government, or global culture? Is convergence shallow or deep—closer acquaintance or true integration? Is it driven by technological invention, environmental necessity, or conscious imitation? Or is convergence resulting simultaneously in some or all of these outcomes? On whose terms is convergence taking place? And for whose benefit?

It is not even clear whether, in Mahbubani’s world, “the great convergence” is a process or an event, or how much of it has already taken place. His opening paragraph argues that “the massive forces unleashed by globalization *are* creating a new global civilization” that has *already*, if only “recently,” rendered irrelevant distinctions such as “‘North and South’ and ‘developed and developing’” (p. 1). Apparently some sort of threshold in the converging process has already been achieved. Yet the book’s final sentence conveys his faith in “the coming great convergence” as if it were a future event. Convergence is “irreversible.” It “will only gain momentum in the coming decades” (p. 247). Why? “Because Everything that Rises Must Converge”—the title of his concluding chapter and possibly a natural law in Mahbubani’s world.

In earlier centuries, Orientalism at its worst belied the complex and nuanced diversities of Asia by, in effect, lobotomizing its peoples and imputing into their emptied skulls one single Asian “mind.” Extreme Occidentalism is Orientalist surgery in reverse. Thus Mahbubani can assert that “most Western minds—with their usual black and white mindset—cannot conceive of ‘good governance’ as an independent and desirable good.” In his own mind “it would be insane to deny that China has enjoyed ‘good governance.’ The reason why Western minds cannot state this obvious fact is that they believe that good governance without democracy is as inconceivable as a semi-pregnant woman.”¹³ In Mahbubani’s world, “The Western mind cannot conceive of the possibility that the ‘unfree’ people of China could possibly be happy. The Western mind has a rigid, one-dimensional, and ideological understanding of the term ‘freedom.’”¹⁴

Mahbubani seems unaware of the self-parody involved in attributing a “black and white mindset” to “most Western minds,” whose refusal to admire China’s governance proves them to be insane, in stark contrast to presumably non-Western—“Restern”?—minds that can at least recognize facts. He is entirely right to acknowledge, as he does, the massive improvement in the material welfare of China’s people that has taken place under its authoritarian regime since the 1970s. But in his writing, *Convergence* included, he has been far less willing to acknowledge the

historical fact of “bad governance” in China, whose Maoist regime was responsible for the deaths of an estimated forty-plus million of its own citizens between 1949 and 1975.

Nor is bad governance in China merely archival. In 2010, China’s outdoor air pollution contributed to an estimated 1.2 million premature deaths.¹⁵ Yet in that same year, the Chinese government refused to release data that it continued to gather secretly on the deadliest particles, and even tried to stop the U.S. embassy in Beijing from collecting and posting the same information. Mahbubani might also wish to consider why, if only a deranged “Western mind” could deny that the Chinese people are happily enjoying good governance, in 2010 alone there were an estimated 180,000 protests, riots, and mass demonstrations in China. Prominent among the objects of unrest were official seizures of land without adequate consultation or compensation, endemic and widespread official corruption, and official complicity in or indifference toward lethal pollution—not to mention the official repression of Tibet that has driven more than a hundred ethnic Tibetans to burn themselves to death since 2009.

What is the value of collapsing the complexities of global politics and transformative processes of material and technical change into a great contest—or, for that matter, a “great convergence”—between “the West” and “the Rest”? Or between the United States, which “cannot understand Asia,” and the “Asia” that it cannot understand? Keeping in mind the competition and cooperation that characterize relations between the United States and China, is Mahbubani’s thesis that “everything that rises must converge” more plausible and less fatuous than the antithetical contention that “everything that rises must conflict”? Does Aung San Suu Kyi deserve scorn for thanking “the West” for its support? Just how dispensable are human rights in Mahbubani’s world?

Countries have mottoes. If Mahbubani’s world had one, it might be: “We have met the enemy, and they are them”—that is, “the West.” Perhaps his next book will be inspired instead by a variation on something that cartoonist Walt Kelly wrote many years ago—a critique more in keeping with the shared responsibility that globalization and convergence would seem to imply: “We have met the enemy, and they are us.”¹⁶

Mahbubani rightly asks “the West” to be introspective. He should take his own advice.

NOTES

1. See mahbubani.net/book3.html#AdvancePraise for the comment by Summers.

2. Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Asians Think? Understanding the Divide Between East and West* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1998), 58.

3. Ian Buruma, “The Man Who Would Be King,” *New York Review of Books*, 10 June 1999.

4. For the Mahhubani quotes, see Mahhubani, "The Singapore Difference," *New York Review of Books*, 23 September 1999; for the Buruma quotes, see "Ian Buruma replies," *New York Review of Books*, 23 September 1999.

5. The quotes can be found in, respectively, Thusitha De Silva, "Asia's Thought Leader," *China Daily* (Beijing), 20 July 2012; Mahhubani, "Europe Is a Geopolitical Dwarf," *Financial Times*, 21 May 2008; and Mahhubani, "Smart Power, Chinese Style," *American Interest*, March–April 2008.

6. Kishore Mahhubani, "Asia Has Had Enough of Excusing the West," *Financial Times*, 25 January 2011. For two critical comments by Singaporeans, see, respectively, Alastair Su, "What's Up with Kishore Mahhubani?" HPRgment Blog, 27 January 2011, <http://harvardpolitics.com/online/hprgment-blog/whats-up-with-kishore-mahhubani/>, and "Ng Kok Lim Rebuts Kishore Mahhubani on 'Good Governance,'" 19 April 2013, www.tremertus.com/2013/04/19/ng-kok-lim-rebuts-kishore-mahhubani-on-good-governance.

7. Quotes in this and the next four paragraphs are from Kishore Mahhubani, "The Lady Should Look to Asia Not Europe," *Financial Times*, 14 June 2012.

8. Mahhubani, "The Lady Should Look to Asia."

9. See, for example, Mahhubani, "The Dangers of Decadence: What the Rest Can Teach the West," *Foreign Affairs* 72 (September–October 1993): 10–14, and "The West and the Rest," *National Interest* 28 (Summer 1992): 3–12.

10. Quoted in Sheridan Prasso, "Ambassador for the Asian Century," *Strategy+Business* 50 (Spring 2008): 80–89, available at www.strategy-business.com/article/08108?gko=62d9d&tid=27782251&pg=all.

11. Of the existing "Permanent 5," China, Russia, and the United States would remain; France and the UK would be replaced by the EU; and Brazil, India, and Nigeria would bring the new total of permanent members to 7. Mahhubani's ranked list of 28 "middle powers" runs from Japan to Kenya based on data for population size and domestic product from the World Bank, despite his conviction that its assessments "cannot possibly be objective" (p. 201).

12. As evidence of U.S. perfidy, Mahhubani cites a 2007 diplomatic cable leaked by Wikileaks, but ignores "US Embassy Cables: China Reiterates 'Red Lines,'" sent in 2009, www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/204917. Also unmentioned is how China's refusal to grant Japan the veto delivered the *coup de grâce* to Security Council reform in 2005.

13. "Mahhubani on 'What Is Governance?'" The Governance Blog, 26 March 2013, <http://governancejournal.net/2013/03/26/mahhubani>. On the differing combinations of democracy and governance in Southeast Asia, from Timor-Leste (liberal politics, ineffective governance) to Singapore (illiberal politics, effective governance), see Emmer-son, "Southeast Asia: Minding the Gap Between Democracy and Governance," *Journal of Democracy* 23 (April 2012): 62–73. On conceptualizing the difference, see Francis Fukuyama, "What Is Governance?" *Governance* 26 (July 2013): 347–68.

14. Mahhubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 133–34.

15. Edward Wong, "Air Pollution Linked to 1.2 Million Premature Deaths in China," *The New York Times*, 1 April 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/04/02/world/asia/air-pollution-linked-to-1-2-million-deaths-in-china.html?ref=asia&pagewanted=print.

16. Walt Kelly, *Pogo: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).