

Kishore Mahbubani

Kishore Mahbubani is Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One Wor...*

[Full profile](#)



America's Blinders

May 24, 2013

[Email](#) | [Print](#)

111

22

15

360

SINGAPORE – The time has come to think the unthinkable: the era of American dominance in international affairs may well be coming to an end. As that moment approaches, the main question will be how well the United States is prepared for it.



Illustration by Chris Van Es

Asia's rise over the last few decades is more than a story of rapid economic growth. It is the story of a region undergoing a renaissance in which people's minds are re-opened and their outlook refreshed. Asia's movement toward resuming its former central role in the global economy has so much momentum that it is virtually unstoppable. While the transformation may not always be seamless, there is no longer room to doubt that an Asian century is on the horizon, and that the world's chemistry will change fundamentally.

Global leaders – whether policymakers or intellectuals – bear a responsibility to prepare their societies for impending global shifts. But too many American leaders are shirking this responsibility.

Last year, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, two US senators, one member of the US House of Representatives, and a deputy national security adviser participated in [a forum on the future of American power](#) (I was the chair). When asked what future they anticipated for American power, they predictably declared that the US would remain the world's most powerful country. When asked whether America was prepared to become the world's second-largest economy, they were reticent.

Their reaction was understandable: even entertaining the possibility of the US becoming "number two" amounts to career suicide for an American politician. Elected officials everywhere must adjust, to varying degrees, to fulfill the expectations of those who put them in office.

Intellectuals, on the other hand, have a special obligation to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable. They are supposed to consider all possibilities, even disagreeable ones, and prepare the population for prospective developments. Honest discussion of unpopular ideas is a key feature of an open society.

But, in the US, many intellectuals are not fulfilling this obligation. [Richard Haass](#), the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, [suggested recently](#) that the US "could already be in the second decade of another American century." Likewise, Clyde Prestowitz, the president of the Economic Strategy Institute, [has said](#) that "this century may well wind up being another American century."

To be sure, such predictions may well prove accurate; if they do, the rest of the world will benefit. A strong and dynamic US economy, reinvigorated by cheap shale gas and accelerating innovation, would rejuvenate the global economy as a whole. But Americans are more than ready for this outcome; no preparation is needed.

If the world's center of gravity shifts to Asia, however, Americans will be woefully unprepared. Many Americans remain shockingly unaware of how much the rest of the world, especially Asia, has progressed.

Americans need to be told a simple, mathematical truth. With 3% of the world's population, the US can no longer dominate the rest of the world, because Asians, with

Comments (14)

[New comment](#) | [Explain this](#)

You need to [login](#) in order to leave a comment. If you do not yet have an account, please [register](#).

Show comments of Users Experts

[shanmugham anand](#) 3 days ago

truly a wake-up call to american intellectuals! hope U.S power does not shrink further as China waits with bated breath and biding time to swallow Taiwan.

[Yoshimichi Moriyama](#) 4 days ago

Asia would be confounded and dumbfounded if it was catapulted to global leadership or if it was called on to steer the world; it would be in confusion and at a loss, not knowing what to do with it.

[Expand](#)

 [Jean-Pierre Lehmann](#) 6 days ago

The concept of "the West" corresponds to reality. Though there are vast differences between, say, Moldova and Finland, all the West is united by the three main pillars of its civilisation: Greek philosophy, Roman law and the Judeo-Christian religion. It also conforms to re [Expand](#)

 [Kishore Mahbubani](#) 3 days ago

Jean-Pierre Lehmann has, unsurprisingly, offered a brilliant response to my commentary. He agrees that "the West" is in relative decline, and poses the key question, "what Asia?" Isn't Asia simply a term that Europeans use to describe "not the West," [Expand](#)

[Craig Stevenson](#) 1 week ago

I applaud a rising Asia that becomes more responsible for the global commons, of which whose mass of humanity has and will come to influence and shape. I look forward to more responsibility and maturity in solving the many problems that exist globally toward creating as nice a place as is [Expand](#)

[Zsolt Hermann](#) 1 week ago

100%

I think the whole notion of talking about "dominant forces" in a global world is mistaken. What we realize today, especially through the daily events of the ongoing and deepening global crisis is that we reached such interconnections, that all nations are fully dependent [Expand](#)

[Edward Ponderer](#) 4 days ago

100%

We've a world awash with evermore countless, nonlinear interconnects of ever-increasing coupling constants. It is of course rampant with secondary, tertiary, and higher order cross-coupling terms -- individually well within the order-of-magnitude of, and rapidly approaching the supp [Expand](#)

[Hugh Fullerton](#) 1 week ago

With relief, I greet an era where the USA is not called on to be the economic engine and peacekeeper of the world. I don't think we ever sought this status and its attendant responsibilities, but rather, gained it by default. I only hope that the country or region that assumes the mantle will attempt to wea [Expand](#)

[Sigurd Regnavald](#) 1 week ago

America will still be the most powerful country in the coming decades through the mid-century. Predictions further out are meaningless.

While China may have a larger economy, they will I [Expand](#)

[hari naidu](#) 1 week ago

I've argued with this Singaporean elsewhere...

60% of the world's population, are no longer underperforming. But the belief that America is the only virtuous country, the sole beacon of light in a dark and unstable world, continues to shape many Americans' worldview. American intellectuals' failure to challenge these ideas – and to help the US population shed complacent attitudes based on ignorance – perpetuates a culture of coddling the public.

But, while Americans tend to receive only good news, Asia's rise is not really bad news. The US should recognize that Asian countries are seeking not to dominate the West, but to emulate it. They seek to build strong and dynamic middle classes and to achieve the kind of peace, stability, and prosperity that the West has long enjoyed.

This deep social and intellectual transformation underway in Asia promises to catapult it from economic power to global leadership. China, which remains a closed society in many ways, has an open mind, whereas the US is an open society with a closed mind. With Asia's middle class set to skyrocket from roughly 500 million people today to 1.75 billion by 2020, the US will not be able to avoid the global economy's new realities for much longer.

The world is poised to undergo one of the most dramatic power shifts in human history. In order to be prepared for the transformation, Americans must abandon ingrained ideas and old assumptions, and liberate unthinkable thoughts. That is the challenge facing American public intellectuals today.

Reprinting material from this Web site without written consent from *Project Syndicate* is a violation of international copyright law. To secure permission, please [contact us](#).

111

22

15

360

Let's understand that no one can extrapolate strategic developments during the rest of 21st century let al [Expand](#) :

Nirav Desai 1 week ago

I think India with a GDP which is close to 1.873 trillion US Dollars, needs to find opportunities for growth as the GDP itself is quite large. However, India's per capita GDP is only 1528 US Dollars and is way behind the rest of the world. India ranks 144 on the per capita GDP front. There are thus a lot of [Expand](#)

Frank O'Callaghan 1 week ago

The idea that a century "belongs" to a particular country is crude at best and risible in general. The thought that history comes in such precise packages that start and end on convenient says much about oversimplification. [Expand](#)

Ken Fedio 1 week ago

"The US should recognize that Asian countries are seeking not to dominate the West, but to emulate it."

I'm not sure how this "model" can duplicated in Asia. Granted, I know nothing about Asia, but I see the American S [Expand](#)

Craig Hardt 1 week ago

If this is the dawn of the Asian century and American power is on the decline I would simply ask what institution or government will take the leadership mantle from the U.S. and how do they presume to do so? While the economic rise of Asia matters, we can't make the mistake of defining "Asia" as some [Expand](#)
