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Wake-up Call to the West?

Why did the West believe the collapse of the Soviet Union marked, to quote the title of Francis Fukuyama's popular essay, "the end of history"? According to Singaporean UN Ambassador Kishore Mahbubani, it can be attributed to the myopic worldview held by citizens of Western nations, particularly the United States.

"Sheer power and two huge oceans make Americans unaware of how the world is changing," he asserted at a 1/24/02 Merrill House book talk. "Now the question is, were the events of September 11 an earthquake or merely a tremor? Maybe that is another way to interpret what happened."

That the world's most open society is also among its worst informed poses a "great paradox," Mahbubani observed. He went on to predict that, while Americans may be able to hold back the "tidal wave of change" a little longer, they will ultimately "regret not having used the window of opportunity available when they were overwhelmingly powerful relative to the rest of the world, to strengthen the United Nations and to help deal with the small interdependent world now emerging."



Kishore Mahbubani

world's total — makes it virtually inconceivable that the West can continue shouldering the world's burdens on its own. Alluding to Samuel Huntington's famous essay, Mahbubani called for a fusion, rather than clash, of civilizations. "To have stability, we need to have burden-sharing between the West and other cultures," he said.

Mahbubani has long been fascinated by the contrast between Western and Asian mindsets. His recently published *Can Asians Think? Understanding the Divide between East and West* communicates an

It is in the nature of imperial power to believe your power will last forever, but history teaches us otherwise, Mahbubani said. The shrinking populations of Western countries — now at about 10 percent of the

iconoclastic message: Now that 500 years have passed since Europe started colonizing the world, a new cycle can begin where East and West enjoy a two-way exchange of ideas.

"I can already see the fusion of civilizations taking place in Asia-Pacific," Mahbubani commented. "In particular, East Asia and the United States are coming together in various cooperative ventures." Still, several major hurdles lie ahead — not only Islam but also China.

Of the two, Mahbubani believes that China poses the greater challenge. "If you want to ask the single biggest question that will determine the course of the 21st century — even though we are in the immediate aftermath of September 11th — it will not be the whole question of the West and Islam. If China succeeds, which looks likely, the amount of displacement that it will cause in the current global power structures will be enormous, and the adjustments required, equally enormous."

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