

PHOTOS: REUTERS, AFP

COOL IN JAPAN: Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe (from left), Singapore's Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Chinese Ambassador Wang Yi showing different styles of summer suits during the Cool Asia fashion show in Tokyo.

Diplomats stay 'cool' on the fashion runway

TOKYO

JAPANESE ministers and Asian diplomats ditched their neckties for light summer business attire in a fashion show promoting ways to cut down on air-conditioning use and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Among those "models" on Wednesday night were Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe, Foreign Minister Taro Aso and the ambassadors of China and South Korea.

Mr Kishore Mahbubani, a former top Singapore diplomat and now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, showed how cool a printed long-sleeve shirt worn over dark trousers could be.

The Cool Biz campaign, launched last year, hopes office workers will dress cooler during summer and set air-conditioning at 28 deg C.

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To this end he cites the global institutions that America has helped foster and he believes have helped create a world of comparative peace and stability.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II and with civil war raging in China, America, writes Mahbubani, helped set up many of the multilateral structures that persist to this day, including Asean, which he believes has helped to prevent war across the region.

Some would be tempted to cite Vietnam and, further afield, Korea but it is clear that Mahbubani sees them as America's justified bid to fight off communism.

The International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Security Council are also cited as proof positive of America's benevolent intentions throughout the ensuing Cold War, where successive presidents helped keep in check the malign influence of Soviet-sponsored communism.

Born in 1948, Mahbubani, like many of his generation, faced a polarized choice between capitalism rather than communism, and once he had rejected the latter was rewarded with the opportunity to live the American dream.

From a poor Hindu family who fled Pakistan in the aftermath of partition, he was plucked from poverty by a Lee Kuan Yew program designed to promote young talent. His distinguished diplomatic career eventually saw him become Singapore's ambassador to the UN.

From that perch he saw the implosion of the USSR. But Mahbubani believes that America made a catastrophic mistake then by withdrawing into itself. This created a vacuum in regions such as East Africa and states such as Afghanistan and Pakistan in which extremism could breed.

Now Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, in Singapore, Mahbubani believes this isolationist mindset was also directly responsible for the Asian financial crisis in 1997,

which saw the US-controlled IMF refuse to bail out long term allies such as Indonesia and Thailand.

The clear implication is that the ensuing popular discontent, particularly in Indonesia, has helped fuel anti-Americanism, spread Islamic extremism and encouraged the terrorists to ever-baser acts.

Nevertheless, Mahbubani believes all is not lost.

He says: "It matters a lot what dream you buy. If you are a young Pakistani or Bangladeshi and if you are given the choice between Osama Bin Laden and the American dream — your choice makes a huge difference to the world we live in. The fact that many still

want to buy the American dream cannot be denied. But if they start choosing Bin Laden then we are in huge trouble."

From Kyoto to Iraq, however, Mahbubani believes America is now making the wrong choices, even if they are well-intentioned.

Instead it must face up to the consequences of its policies, take heed of the world community and lead by positive example in all spheres.

Nowhere is this more important than in relation to China.

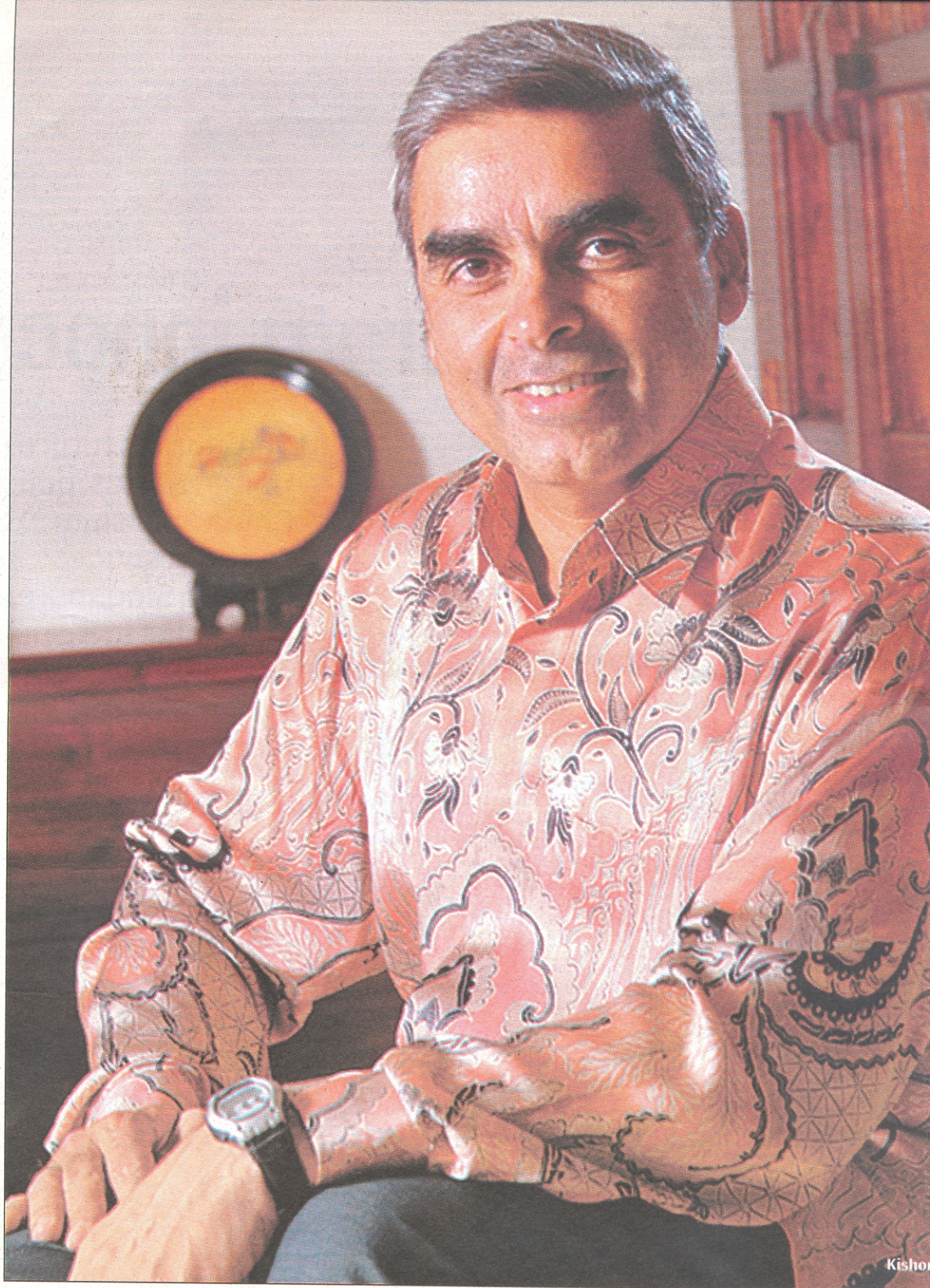
Mahbubani is in no doubt that China is shaping up to be the next global superpower and America's attitude towards this challenge will help shape the 21st century.

How Asia will change the world is partly the subject of his next book, he says.

"We are at a crossroads: if China believes the US will not block its way then it will become a responsible stakeholder in the future. But if the US is perceived as trying to stop it, China will become embittered.

"The US must get the policy right and right now because if they get it wrong we will all suffer for decades to come."

Beyond The Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World by Kishore Mahbubani.
(Public Affairs, HK\$117)



Kishore