

# New dynamics

Asian intellectual says the West must come to terms with a multipolar world

By ANDREW MOODY

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**K**ishore Mahbubani believes the West is in denial about how the world is changing around it. The 70-year-old, who is one of Asia's leading public intellectuals, said it has yet to adjust to the emergence of China as the world's second-largest economy and the rise of other countries such as India.

"Three of the top four economies in the world are now Asian. The West therefore ought to understand that this is not a world it can dominate anymore," he said.

"It needs to ask itself the question as to what practical and pragmatic changes it needs to make to get used to this world, but it is not doing that."

Mahbubani, who was in Beijing for a speaking event, has just published a new book, *Has the West Lost It? A Provocation*.

The Singaporean academic and former diplomat insists, however, that he is not on a mission to belittle the West's contribution to civilization and the advancement of humankind.

"We are living in a time where this great Western project to improve the human condition has succeeded. The West should be celebrating and saying, 'Hooray! We did it!' but it is instead clearly depressed."

This sense of gloom is purveyed by CNN and other Western media outlets, according to Mahbubani, when they focus on such issues as the economic hardship of the US Rust Belt or Brexit when most of the world is experiencing an unprecedented rise in living standards.

"You would think that this was a depressing period in history, but most people in the West are shocked to discover that the last 30 years have been the best for human history since history began. In 1950 — two years after I was born — 75 percent of the world's population, including me, were living in extreme poverty."

Mahbubani said it is impossible to ignore the contribution of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up initiative, which has lifted 800 million out of poverty and whose 40th anniversary was marked last year.

"Deng Xiaoping will go down as the greatest leader of the 20th century, even greater than Churchill or anybody, because he picked his country up at a painful and even tormented time after the 'cultural revolution' (1966-76) and turned it around. He carries out the largest and most revolutionary transformation of China and opens it up to the world," he said.

Mahbubani, who was speaking in the lobby of the Nuo Hotel in central Beijing after addressing the Third



Singaporean academic and former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani speaks to China Daily after addressing the Third Understanding China Conference in December in Beijing. WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY

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Understanding China Conference, co-hosted by the Berggruen Institute's 21st Century Council from Dec 16 to 18, said the takeoff of China and other Asian countries was at a time when the West was experiencing a moment of "absolute hubris".

This, according to Mahbubani, was when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 and Francis Fukuyama, the US political scientist, wrote *The End of History and the Last Man*, arguing that Western liberal democracy had prevailed for all time.

"The assumption was that the West could keep going on autopilot, but it was precisely the wrong time for it to turn on that mechanism because it was when Asia began waking up in a serious way," he said.

"It was a time for the West to do a strategic U-turn and give up on the idea that it can keep dominating the

world and intervening in so many conflicts, but it did the opposite. Francis is a wonderful person, but his book did a lot of brain damage to the West."

Mahbubani argues instead that the world is returning to a default position that has existed for 1,800 out of the last 2,000 years, with China and India being the two largest economies.

Mahbubani, although born in Singapore, is the son of parents who settled in the then British colony after leaving Hyderabad, which is now in Sindh, Pakistan. His father, a salesman, arrived in Singapore in the 1930s and his mother arrived after India's partition.

He excelled academically, taking a first-class degree in philosophy from the University of Singapore, before pursuing a diplomatic career, ending

will hold its second summit this year.

"The Belt and Road Initiative is actually a remarkably generous project. China is deploying trillions of dollars of capital to improve infrastructure all over the world. That is amazing," he said.

Mahbubani believes one of the West's main priorities should be a new way of engaging with China.

"The idea that you can contain China is a great delusion," he said.

In the book he refers to advice former US president Bill Clinton gave in a speech at Yale University in 2003.

"He says that if America is going to continue to be No 1, then it can do what it wants. It can choose this or that. But if it can conceive of a world where it is no longer No 1, then it is in its interests to create multilateral rules, partnerships and institutions."

Mahbubani, whose other books include *Can Asians Think?* and *The Great Convergence*, believes some of this is lost in the current trade dispute between the US and China.

"The reality is that the reduction of global poverty has been because of the spectacular increase in global trade, which has benefited not only China but the US, too. The increase in global trade is due in part to the World Trade Organization. And what does the US try to do but cripple it?" he said.

Mahbubani believes Europe is making major mistakes, too, particularly in relation to Africa, by not being a ready market to exports of African agriculture and other goods, and attempting to close itself off.

He believes it should be supportive of China's investment, particularly in infrastructure, on the continent.

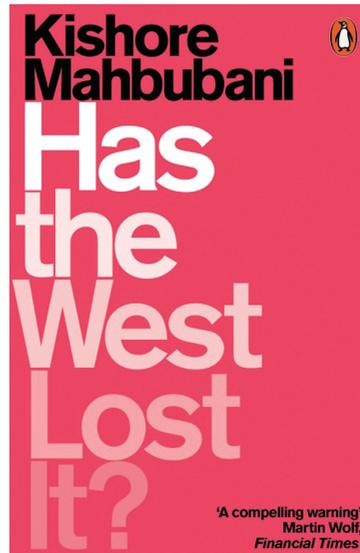
"I always tell Europeans that if you don't export jobs to Africa, Africa will export Africans to Europe. China is investing in Africa, building highways, ports and setting up factories that will reduce the risk of a migration crisis for Europe."

He also believes that Brexit is another fracture in the West and will be ultimately bad for the United Kingdom.

"It's a completely unnecessary tragedy. There is no doubt in my mind that the UK's standing will go down in the world, if it is not part of the European Union. People used to feel that if you dealt with the British, you would have influence on European policy, too."

Mahbubani, however, believes that the major challenge for the West is to recognize that the world has a new dynamic.

"What the West has got to learn to live with is that it is a much more diverse place with a whole range of political and economic systems," he said.



Mahbubani's new book, *Has the West Lost It? A Provocation*, published by Allen Lane.

up as Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations and serving as president of the United Nations Security Council from 2001 to 2002.

He believes the Security Council needs to be reformed to reflect the more populous countries.

Mahbubani, who is now a professor at the National University of Singapore, is supportive of what China is doing in terms of adding to the global architecture with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Belt and Road Initiative, which