

A Short Exploration of Kishore Mahbubani's Views on Asian Development: Insights from *The New Asian Hemisphere* and *The Great Convergence*

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Introduction

Kishore Mahbubani is a Singaporean academic and former diplomat known for his thought-provoking analyses of global power dynamics. Having served as President of the United Nations Security Council and as Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, Mahbubani has developed a reputation for bridging Eastern and Western perspectives on governance, economics, and international relations. Two of his most influential works, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (2008) and *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (2013), capture his core ideas on how Asia has risen and where it is heading.

This paper provides an in-depth overview of Mahbubani's views on Asian development, corruption, and governance, drawing on insights from these two books and supplementary arguments he has made elsewhere. By analyzing his take on the so-called "pillars of Western success," his predictions for a rebalanced global order, and his comments on topics such as corruption in India and the suitability of democracy for China, we gain a comprehensive perspective on Mahbubani's outlook and the criticisms that accompany it.

Summary of *The New Asian Hemisphere*

In *The New Asian Hemisphere*, Mahbubani argues that global power is undergoing a historic shift away from the West and toward Asia, especially China and India. He attributes this transformation to:

- **Economic Resurgence:** Asian economies have embraced market-driven reforms, encouraged foreign investment, and become major players in global trade.

- **Governance Lessons:** Many Asian countries have learned from Western governance models, selectively adopting meritocracy, rule of law, and efficient bureaucratic practices.
- **Technological Leapfrogging:** Rapid technological adoption—especially in communications and infrastructure—has allowed Asian countries to bypass older stages of industrial development.
- **Education Focus:** Governments in Asia have invested heavily in education, producing a large, skilled labor force that fuels continual growth.

A central theme is that Asia's rise does not necessarily spell doom for the West, provided Western countries adapt to new realities. Mahbubani promotes dialogue and cooperation, warning that rigidity in Western thinking could exacerbate tensions and lead to missed economic and diplomatic opportunities. Notably, he points to the importance of good governance and the need to tackle institutional corruption if India—and Asia more broadly—are to realize their full potential.

Summary of *The Great Convergence*

In *The Great Convergence*, Mahbubani expands on the idea of a shifting world order by highlighting how global interdependence—fueled by trade, technology, and transnational challenges—makes a zero-sum mentality outdated. Key points include:

- **Global Middle Class:** Mahbubani notes the rise of a vast global middle class, notably in Asia, which increasingly shares values, consumer habits, and aspirations once associated with Western societies.
- **Common Challenges:** Issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and pandemics require collective action, dissolving traditional divides between East and West.
- **Erosion of Old Hierarchies:** Historical geopolitical hierarchies (for example, the post-WWII power structure dominated by the U.S. and Europe) are giving way to a more multipolar or “polycentric” system.
- **Need for Strong Global Governance:** Mahbubani advocates strengthening global governance institutions (e.g., the United Nations, IMF, WTO) to manage interdependent challenges effectively.

Instead of succumbing to a new “Cold War” mentality, Mahbubani emphasizes that convergence—through shared interests and collaborative leadership—offers a positive path forward for both East and West. He also reiterates the importance of coherent internal governance structures, noting that countries able to maintain stability and control corruption will fare better in a world of deepening interdependence.

Pillars of Western Success

Across his works, Mahbubani highlights what he calls the “pillars of Western wisdom” or “pillars of Western success.” The precise number can vary, but commonly cited themes include:

1. **Free-Market Economics:** Emphasis on private enterprise, open competition, and entrepreneurial culture, fostering wealth creation and innovative solutions.
2. **Science and Technology:** Sustained support for research, leading to continuous breakthroughs and the application of new technologies across industries.
3. **Meritocracy:** Rewarding talent and ability over birth or connections, thus attracting and retaining skilled individuals from around the world.
4. **Pragmatism:** A practical, problem-solving approach to policy and governance rather than ideological rigidity.
5. **Rule of Law:** A reliable legal system and the protection of property rights, creating stability and trust among citizens and investors.
6. **Education:** Broad-based access to quality schooling and higher education, fueling scientific advancements and economic growth.
7. **Culture of Self-Criticism and Renewal:** Openness to questioning traditional norms and structures, allowing for reform and reinvention.
8. **Culture of Peace (Post-1945):** Collaboration and institutions (like the European Union and NATO) that helped maintain peace and redirect efforts toward prosperity and innovation.

Mahbubani stresses that these pillars are not exclusively Western. Asian nations that have selectively adopted and adapted these pillars have experienced robust growth, suggesting that the formula for success transcends geographic or cultural boundaries.

Kishore's Observations on Corruption and Governance in India

One of Mahbubani's recurring themes is the role of corruption in hindering economic and social progress. In various discussions, he points to India's high levels of corruption as a critical obstacle to the country's ability to fully leverage its democratic framework and enormous human potential.

While India has upheld democratic institutions and free-market reforms—two of the pillars—systemic corruption, red tape, and bureaucratic inefficiencies can delay public projects, discourage investments, and perpetuate inequalities. Mahbubani contrasts this situation with the successes of:

- **Singapore:** Known for strong rule of law, minimal corruption, and a culture of meritocracy, Singapore ensures that public officers are well-compensated and held to strict ethical standards. This climate of trust and transparency fosters investor confidence and governmental effectiveness.
- **China:** Although operating under a one-party system, China's rapid development and centralized governance structure have helped curb corruption in certain areas (though not universally), allowing major infrastructure and development initiatives to move forward quickly.

Mahbubani suggests that if India could address corruption more aggressively—perhaps by adopting stricter enforcement mechanisms, transparent administrative procedures, and better accountability—then India's large population, vibrant democracy, and tech-savvy workforce could catapult it closer to China's current economic might.

Is China Better Off With or Without Democracy?

A controversial aspect of Mahbubani's analysis is his stance on democracy in China. He does not argue that democracy is unsuited for all societies; instead, he challenges the assumption that every state should adopt Western-style electoral democracy to succeed. Mahbubani observes that China's one-party model, for all its flaws, has facilitated:

- **Consistent Long-Term Planning:** Without electoral pressures every few years, the government can implement multi-decade strategies for infrastructure, education, and economic reform.

- **Rapid Economic Development:** Centralized decision-making and strict policy enforcement have helped lift hundreds of millions out of poverty.
- **Controlled Corruption:** While corruption remains a concern in China, top-down anti-graft campaigns can be decisive (if uneven), in contrast to more fragmented efforts in some democratic settings.

In this light, Mahbubani questions the efficacy of imposing electoral democracy on countries with different histories, governance structures, and societal priorities. He argues that democracy can be a powerful tool for accountability and personal freedoms, yet it may also introduce political gridlock in places without strong institutions or a culture of compromise. Consequently, he believes that each nation must chart a path that resonates with its unique cultural and developmental context, rather than pursuing a universal, one-size-fits-all formula.

Mahbubani's Predictions

Building on the arguments in both *The New Asian Hemisphere* and *The Great Convergence*, Mahbubani makes a few notable predictions:

- **Greater Asian Influence:** Asia's economic and demographic weight will continue to expand, likely turning Asian capitals into key centers for global decision-making.
- **Need for Institutional Reform:** International organizations must adapt their structures and voting systems to reflect the new balance of economic power.
- **Global Convergence on Common Challenges:** As problems like pandemics and climate change become more urgent, nations will have little choice but to collaborate, compelling further convergence.

While he is largely optimistic about global interdependence driving peaceful cooperation, Mahbubani cautions that miscalculations or entrenched rivalries could slow or derail this process. He often highlights the importance of wise leadership—both in the West and the East—to steer the world toward inclusive and equitable solutions.

Criticisms of Mahbubani's Analysis

Critics have raised several objections to Mahbubani's perspective:

- **Overestimation of Convergence:** Some argue that cultural, ideological, and political divides (for example, authoritarian vs. liberal democratic models) may be deeper than Mahbubani suggests, complicating global cooperation.
- **Underplaying Tensions:** Realpolitik considerations—like national security concerns and competitive rivalries—may not be as easily resolved as Mahbubani hopes.
- **One-Size-Fits-All Assumption:** Critics say that replicating Western pillars might be more challenging in societies with different historical trajectories, political structures, or social values, and thus direct adoption of “Western pillars” may be oversimplified.
- **Insufficient Attention to Internal Issues:** Some contend that Mahbubani focuses primarily on macro-level power shifts and institutions, without fully addressing domestic challenges of corruption, inequality, and governance in both Western and Asian settings.
- **Leniency Toward Authoritarian Models:** Mahbubani’s openness to non-democratic governance as a viable path to development has drawn criticism from those who view democratic governance as universally necessary for protecting human rights and individual freedoms.

Despite these critiques, there is broad acknowledgment that Mahbubani’s works serve as a valuable mirror, prompting Western readers to examine the foundations of their own success while encouraging non-Western countries to selectively emulate them.

Conclusion

Taken together, *The New Asian Hemisphere* and *The Great Convergence* offer a cohesive vision of how Asia is rising within a rapidly changing international environment. By highlighting the pillars of Western success, Kishore Mahbubani illustrates that the West’s achievements were not accidental but the product of well-structured economic, legal, and cultural frameworks that any region can learn from. His central message is that a “great convergence” is possible if rising countries continue to adopt these pillars while the West adapts to a more multipolar world.

Yet, the path to convergence is neither guaranteed nor free of obstacles, as skeptics point out issues of entrenched rivalry, divergent ideologies, and domestic governance challenges. Mahbubani’s defense—or at least acceptance—of China’s political system remains controversial, especially for those who view democratic governance as inherently superior. Likewise,

his commentary on corruption in India underscores the difficulty of implementing reforms in large, diverse democracies. Ultimately, Mahbubani's analyses serve as both a roadmap and a cautionary tale, urging cooperation and adaptation in a world where no single power can afford to act in isolation. Whether one fully endorses his views or only partially agrees, his arguments raise essential questions about the dynamics of global power and how societies can best forge their unique paths to prosperity.

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