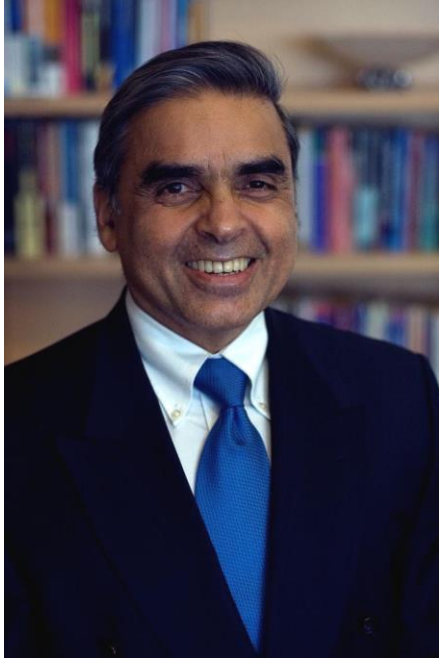


## **Kishore Mahbubani**

Former President of the UN Security Council



Kishore Mahbubani is the current Dean Professor in the Practice of Public Policy at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LYKSP) of the National University of Singapore. With the Singapore Foreign Service from 1971 to 2004, he had postings in Cambodia, Malaysia, Washington, D.C., and New York, where he served two stints as Singapore's Ambassador to the UN and President of the UN Security Council in January 2001 and May 2002.

---

Students, faculty and members of the Cornell community gathered in Kennedy Hall's Call Auditorium on February 13 to hear Kishore Mahbubani, Dean and Professor at the National University of Singapore, former Singapore Ambassador to the United Nations and President of the United Nations Security Council, give the 2013 Bartels World Affairs Lecture. The title of his talk was, "The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World."

After an introduction from Cornell Provost Kent Fuchs, Mahbubani began his lecture on convergence by alluding to cultural differences. "In America you begin with a joke, in Asia you begin with an apology, so perhaps the best would be to begin by apologizing for a joke." He continued that there have been 2 general narratives about our world, a stronger Western narrative and an emerging non-Western narrative. For a long time, Western societies have had the most optimistic view. Now, the 12% who live in the West are more pessimistic about the future than the other 88%. In his talk, Mahbubani set out to answer three thematic questions: Why is there more optimism in Asia? What are the challenges to be faced? What are some remarkably easy prescriptions for success?

Mahbubani started with what he described as the "good news," several reasons why the world is better off than ever before. His first example was that the likelihood of a new major war was at its lowest point in history, and the number of people being killed in wars is at its lowest since statistics have been kept. "From the dawn of history, society has been concerned with war and peace. Today wars are a sunset industry," he said. "Southeast Asia was once described as the Balkans of Asia, and now it's at peace."

Another reason for optimism is that global poverty is declining. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) sought to halve global poverty by 2015; this goal will be met and exceeded by the end of 2013. The success of China and India alone has lifted 600 million people out of poverty. Today in Asia, 600 million people enjoy middle class standards of living, and by 2020 this figure will be 1.75 billion. This constitutes a 350% increase over 7 years. "This is the most remarkable transformation in human history, and part of the great convergence," he said. "The reason for this convergence is that in all parts of the world people are coming to a common understanding of what it takes to build a good society."

Next, Mahbubani discussed the challenges this "great convergence" faces. He defined one challenge as the potential tension between the U.S., the world's greatest power, and China, the world's greatest emerging power. Although we should be seeing more signs of rising tension between the two, he said, "It is quite puzzling that we are seeing the opposite," because China is stabilizing the bilateral relationship by creating economic interdependence. Another challenge Mahbubani identified was the tension between Islam and the West. The majority of Muslims are enjoying the benefits of global convergence. Indonesia, the world's most populous predominantly Muslim country, is enjoying annual growth rates of 6 to 7%, and Bangladesh, once described by Henry Kissinger as a "basket case," has grown at 6% per annum for the past 10 years. Mahbubani believes that the key ingredient to diffusing tension between Islam and the West is a two state solution in Israel and Palestine. Since the relative power of the U.S. will decline in the coming years, he advised that Israel should make peace with the Palestinians now. A third challenge Mahbubani identified is in preserving the quality of the global environment. Where is widespread concern that the growing global middle class will consume more non-renewable resources and produce more greenhouse gasses, Mahbubani believes that we need to reallocate "sacrifice" equitably across the world. "You can't ask Indians not to electrify while people in the United States are still able to drive big S.U.V.s," he said.

The third and final part of Mahbubani's talk focused on what he described as the "Low hanging fruit," some prescriptions for success in the near term. "We live increasingly in one way or another in a global village," he said, "and we should be increasing the strength of our 'Global village council.' It has been the consistent policy of Western countries, led by the U.S., to keep global village councils like the U.N. weak." Paraphrasing a speech given by Bill Clinton in 2003, Mahbubani said that it is in the interests of the dominant U.S. to build stronger multilateral institutions so that whoever is dominant next will be constrained by these institutions. "It is in the self-interest of the U.S. to change its policy towards these multilateral institutions such as the WHO and IAEA," Mahbubani said.

After concluding his prepared remarks, Mahbubani answered questions from the floor. Provost Kent Fuchs asked the first question, whether it was harder to be an academic or a U.N. diplomat. Mahbubani joked that while President of the United Nations Security Council he had much less power to make changes than he did as a dean. An audience member then asked, given the thesis in Acemoglu and Robinson's *Why Nations Fail* that inclusive political institutions lead to inclusive economic institutions, how Mahbubani could explain the success of Singapore and China. Mahbubani responded that it was a Western project to spread education, science and technology around the world, and China has succeeded because of its ability to use state power to incorporate these key elements. Meanwhile, the West is walking away from one of the foundations of its success by refusing to sign free trade agreements even while China is signing them with all of its Asian trade partners. Mahbubani believes that China will have to expand personal freedoms to continue its success story. "China will have to become a democracy, the destination is not in doubt, only the route and timing," he said.

A student asked, "If Western powers have had a role in keeping the budgets of multilateral institutions low, what role is to be played by the rising Asian powers?" Mahbubani responded that although an

# 2013 BARTELS SPEAKER

ascendant China has adopted a policy of not aspiring to leadership, now is the time for it to take a lead role in the international community. He cautioned, however, that the U.N. has a free-rider problem, and nobody wants to pay more than they are compelled to.

A student asked Mahbubani if, when suggesting that the West needed to take a more long term view of redistributing “sacrifice” across the global economy, he was suggesting a move away from transactional interests and advocating a change in how capitalism is organized? Mahbubani responded with David Brooks’ observation that in the old days Americans used to invest in the future, and that now we are borrowing from it. “This isn’t because of capitalism, but politics. Something has gone horribly wrong in the U.S. political system,” Mahbubani concluded.

The Henry E. and Nancy Horton Bartels World Affairs Fellowship was established in 1984, to bring prominent international leaders to Cornell. The mission of the fellowship program is explicitly educational-to foster a broadened worldview among Cornell students by bringing to campus persons who have distinguished themselves as international public figures.

[Cornell Chronicle](#)

[CornellCast Video](#)