

**PERSONA GRATA**  
**Лики и личности**



KISHORE MAHBUBANI

**“ASEAN’S PROGRESS IS  
TRULY REMARKABLE...”**

---

*Kishore Mahbubani (born in 1948) is a prominent Singaporean diplomat and researcher in the field of international relations. He received his degrees from the National University of Singapore and Dalhousie University. For three decades since the early 1970s he was in the diplomatic service of Singapore. Twice (in 1984–1989 and 1998–2004) he was the Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations. In accordance with the rotation principle in 2001 and 2002, he presided over the UN Security Council. In 2004, Kishore Mahbubani was appointed Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including many pieces in leading international analytical publications. In 2017 Kishore Mahbubani published a volume on the achievements of ASEAN. On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Association, Mezhdunarodnye Protsessy (International Trends) journal interviewed Ambassador Mahbubani. We thank Ekaterina Koldunova, senior fellow at MGIMO’s ASEAN Center for helping us in preparing this interview.*

**IT:** *Professor Mahbubani, what determined your decision to join the diplomatic service? How had this work shaped your future career path?*

**K.M.:** My life has had many paradoxical twists and turns. I didn’t decide to join the diplomatic service. I was forced to do so. Since I came from a poor family, I was given a scholarship to study in the National University of Singapore (NUS). One condition of the scholarship was that I had to work for the government for five years after graduation. That is how I ended up in the diplomatic service.

However, since I was forced to join it, I wanted to escape from it when I was a young man. Since I was a radical young student, I wasn’t keen to spend my life working for a government. However, after working for a few years in the Singapore Foreign Service, I discovered that it was actually quite a noble mission to defend the interests of a small state like Singapore against larger states. Since I had always believed in supporting the underdog, I was happy to defend an underdog like Singapore in the international arena. I also became aware of how important the UN was for small states like Singapore.

**IT:** *Ambassador, for many years you represented Singapore in the United Nations and you presided twice at the UN Security Council in 2001 and 2002. Judging from your experience of that time what can “small” states tell “big” states today?*

**K.M.:** One of the biggest “secrets” I discovered in the UN was that the world’s number one power, the US, had a clever, covert policy to keep the UN weak and ineffective. This was done in many ways: starving it of funds, selecting relatively weak UN Secretary-Generals, and demonising it in the American media. The US did this on the assumption that it would be number one forever.

Only one American leader, Bill Clinton, showed the wisdom of questioning this self-destructive American policy. In a speech in Yale in 2003 (after he stepped down), he asked his fellow Americans whether they should start “trying to create a world with rules and partnerships and habits of behaviour that we would like to live in when we’re no longer the military, political, economic superpower in the world”. My book, *The Great Convergence*, explains the wisdom of this question. Sadly, American policymakers never heeded Bill Clinton’s wise advice. As a result, America has continued its policy of weakening the UN.

We now live in a small, interdependent world where global crises (like global financial crises and global warming) can only be solved through global cooperation in UN fora. America should therefore abandon its self-destructive policies in the UN.

**IT:** *After having served for more than three decades in the MFA of Singapore you joined Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. What was (and probably still is) the most challenging in your academic career?*

**K.M.:** My academic career has been a blessing. In my 13 years as Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, I have published five books: *Beyond the Age of Innocence*, *The New Asian Hemisphere*, *The Great Convergence*, *Can Singapore Survive?* and *The ASEAN Miracle*. My fellow Deans tell me that it is unusual for Deans to write books. I am fortunate that I could produce five.

It is also a blessing to run a School of Public Policy. Why? Because a School of Public Policy is inherently multi-disciplinary. Its curriculum rests on 3 pillars: Economics, Politics and Public Management. Yet, even though most

serious public policy problems can only be solved through integrating these disciplines, most professors would prefer to teach within their own disciplinary silos. Fortunately, our School has been among the first to have professors from all three disciplines teach simultaneously in one classroom.

This was wise because many of our contemporary challenges are a result of economics affecting politics or politics affecting economics. The Trump political phenomenon is a result of the economic destruction of jobs for white middle-class voters. The Brexit economic phenomenon is a result of an unwise political decision to pacify the extreme far right in the Conservative Party. Until academics learn to integrate different disciplines in their classrooms, they will not prepare their students well for their public policy careers.

**IT:** *In your superbly written book *Can Asians Think?* (1998) you posed two vitally important questions – “Why have Asian societies lost a thousand years and slipped far behind the European societies that they were far ahead of at the turn of the last millennium?” and “Can Asians think for themselves?” Since then do you think Asian societies have stood up for themselves to answer these two challenging questions?*

**K.M.:** Yes! Asia is returning to its natural role of providing the world’s largest economies. From the year 1 to the year 1820, the two largest economies of the world were always those of China and India. Hence, it was only in the last 200 years that Europe and North America took off. Viewed against the backdrop of the past 2,000 years, the past 200 years have been a great historical aberration. All aberrations come to a natural end.

And in the case of Asia, this aberration is ending faster than expected. In 1980, the US share of the global GDP was 25% in PPP terms, while that of China was only 2.2%. Yet, by 2014, China’s share had become larger. Today, in PPP terms, three of the top four economies in the world are already Asian: namely, China, the US, India and Japan (in that order).

As I document in *The New Asian Hemisphere*, Asians are succeeding because they have

finally understood, absorbed and implemented seven pillars of Western wisdom, namely: free market economics, science and technology, meritocracy, pragmatism, a culture of peace, the rule of law, and education. Fortunately, these Asian success stories are also being reflected in other parts of the world, including in Africa and Latin America. Sadly, even though Asian societies are succeeding because of Western wisdom, Western societies are walking away from this Western wisdom. Trump is dangerously courting disaster by advocating protectionist policies, which will eventually damage America significantly.

**IT:** *We know that Singapore has always acted as a driving force for deeper regional integration in Southeast Asia. Are you satisfied with the way ASEAN is evolving today having reached fifty? How do you perceive Association's place in the new global order?*

**K.P.:** As my co-author, Jeffery Sng, and I explain in *The ASEAN Miracle*, ASEAN deserves a Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 because it has brought peace and prosperity to the most diverse corner of planet earth. Out of the 640 million people in Southeast Asia, 240 million are Muslims, 130 million are Christians and 140 million are Buddhists. In addition, we have Hindus, Confucianists, Taoists and communists. Combined, ASEAN is already the sixth-largest economy of the world and is well on its way to becoming the fourth-largest by 2030.

Despite its successes, ASEAN is a hugely imperfect organisation. ASEAN moves like a crab. It takes two steps forward, one step backwards and one step sideways; it seems to be going around in circles. But if we analyse ASEAN's progress decade by decade, its progress is remarkable. In the global arena, ASEAN has positioned itself well by providing many neutral fora for great powers to meet. And the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is the only multilateral forum, which includes North Korea. In short, ASEAN provides a valuable diplomatic service to the larger Asia-Pacific region by providing a neutral platform for all great powers to meet.

Yet, ASEAN is also under threat today. It could be torn apart by rising geopolitical ri-

valry between the US and China. This is why Jeffery and I call upon both Beijing and Washington D.C. to treat ASEAN as a "delicate Ming vase" that could easily be broken. If both these capitals adopt wise policies towards ASEAN, both will also benefit from the wider ecosystem of peace that ASEAN is gradually developing in the larger Asia-Pacific region. This is why Singapore has actively worked behind the scenes to promote a greater role for ASEAN in the region.

**IT:** *In your most recent book *The ASEAN Miracle* (2017, co-authored with Jeffery Sng) you mention that Russia-ASEAN relations still remain essentially symbolic. What do you think can make this relationship stronger?*

**K.M.:** It is true that Russia-ASEAN relations remain largely symbolic. This is shown in the trade figures. ASEAN's trade with China (346 billion USD), the US (212 billion USD), Japan (238 billion USD) and India (59 billion USD) is much larger than the trade between ASEAN and Russia (13 billion USD). Similarly, the political and cultural relations between Russia and ASEAN are not strong.

However, all this could change if Russia were to adopt a stronger "Look East" policy. In 2010, Russia announced a "Turn to the East" policy. In October 2014, President Putin said at the annual gathering of the Valdai Club in Sochi: "Asia is playing an ever greater role in the world, in the economy and in politics, and there is simply no way we can afford to overlook these developments. Everyone is doing this, and we will do so too, all the more so as a large part of our country is geographically in Asia. Why should we not make use of our competitive advantages in this area? It would be extremely short-sighted not to do so." It was wise for President Putin to pay more attention to Asia, as Europe has been unkind to Russia. Even though many American and German leaders assured Russian leaders that NATO would not be expanded after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this still happened. The West took advantage of Russia's weakness in the 1990s.

Russia is both a European and an Asian power. It should therefore give equal emphasis

to its European and Asian links. Fortunately, Russia enjoys good ties with China and India. However, its ties to ASEAN are far weaker. A major Russian push to develop closer ties with ASEAN will be well-received in ASEAN. One way of doing this is to ensure the strong and steady participation of Russian leaders in the annual East Asian Summits (EAS). Symbolism counts for a lot in Asian minds.

**IT:** *Many in Russia follow your publications and academic activities. What could you wish to the new generation of Russian IR and Asian studies scholars?*

**K.M.:** Russian IR studies have been distorted for the same reason that Asian IR studies have been distorted. We have all been affected by the unnatural domination of American IR scholars in most IR scholarship. We cite American scholars more than we cite non-American scholars.

We should begin to question this dependence on American IR scholarship. If American

IR scholarship is truly better than that of the rest of the world, why have American foreign policies been so disastrous, especially since 9/11 happened in 2001? The American invasion of Iraq, led and managed by graduates of America's leading universities, has been one of the most disastrous invasions of all time.

The honest truth about American IR scholarship is that it is a remarkably insular discourse. Most American scholars make a huge conceptual mistake by trying to understand the world through American conceptual lenses. As a result, they misunderstand the world.

Since Russia is a strong and self-confident power, Russian IR scholars can take the lead in educating American IR scholars on the need to move away from their narrow, insular perspectives. Asian scholars will be happy to work with Russian IR scholars in this mission of re-educating American IR scholars.

*Your Excellency, thank you so much for your time and attention to the readers of our journal.*