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QI Panel:

Living the Asian Century: A Book Conversation with Kishore Mahbubani

February 12th, 2025
8:00 - 9:00 AM ET

Sarang Shidore 1:00

Hello and welcome to this Quincy Institute book conversation. My name is Sarang Shidore, I am the director of the Global South program here at the Quincy Institute. We are a transpartisan think tank here in Washington, DC that's working to build a world where peace is a norm and war is an exception. In our research and advocacy efforts, we are promoting ideas that move US foreign policy away from military adventurism and toward more diplomacy and economic engagement in the spirit of realist restraint. This implies defending us vital interests based on what's good for the American people and not what's good for the special interests that have fueled American wars for the last 70 years. The Global South program here at the Quincy Institute aims to achieve a new bargain between the United States and as diverse, predominantly unaligned meta region stretching from Mexico City to Manila. The program recognizes the global South's instinct for multi alignment and aims to build mutually productive relations in the US national interest.

Today we'll be conversing with a very special guest who actually needs no introduction. So what I'm going to do today is dispense with my usual two paragraphs of introductions for our guests and just mention his name. It's Professor Kishore Mahbubani, former Singaporean diplomat, academic and prolific author. We are going to speak to him about his new book, Living the Asian century, an undiplomatic memoir. Now, Professor mahbubani has written lots of books so far, close to 10 on his region, Southeast Asia, on Asia, on the west, and indeed the wider world system. But today we are going to have a special conversation, because this book is going to give us a few insights, not only to the geopolitics that shaped Kishore mabubani, but also and the way he shaped it himself, but also the person and how he came to various questions in his career and in his life, and indeed transcended many challenges. So Kishore, welcome back to the Quincy Institute.

Kishore Mahbubani 3:19

I'm happy to join you again. Thank you having me

Sarang Shidore 3:23

Wonderful. Well, I have to tell you that this reading this book was very enjoyable. I finished it in less than a weekend, and it was, I have to say, actually even more readable than your other books, which is actually saying a lot, because all your books are very readable and accessible and as a memoir, it's also your story, as much as all of the personalities and incidents that you

describe. So maybe let's start from the beginning. You write, quite candidly in your book that you did not grow up in a wealthy family. In fact, an immigrant family from India before partition, a family of five sharing a small, one bedroom house, a family in which nobody except yourself made it to college. But I was also struck not just by the adversity of economic adversity of your of your childhood, but also the diversity of your neighborhood where you grew up in Singapore, of course, then it was British Malaya when you were a child. So tell us something more about this experience growing up in this neighborhood and in these sorts of challenging conditions.

Kishore Mahbubani 4:39

Well, I mean, I must say, as I look back on my childhood, it's especially in contrast to where I am today. It's hard to believe that I actually went through all those remarkable things, you know? I mean, I experienced real poverty. I almost died of diarrhea. At the age of six months, the doctors told my mother, your son is gone at the age of six years, when I went to school, I was put in a special feeding program because I was technically undernourished. Now, as you can see, I'm over nourished the but you know, we had no flush started in our house. My father kept, constantly, kept losing his job. We had debt collectors coming to our house, and when Chinese gangsters came to the door, you know, to collect debts, my dad would roll under the bed, and then I would have to persuade the Chinese gangsters to go away. And of course, I even had to, once walk across the street to a coffee shop to bring home my father, who had just gotten to a brawl, and it was holding two broken beer bottles in his hand, and he had blood and sweat and everything on his shirt, you know. So, I mean, that was a really rough typical third world childhood that I went through, and to me looking back now, I actually consider it a blessing, because, number one, I actually understand what the majority of the world's population has gone through also, and the fact that Singapore has been able to lift me and most of its citizens out of poverty also provides hope to lots of people around the world who may maybe we too can travel the same journey that people like me in Singapore have done.

Sarang Shidore 6:35

Yeah, indeed, in many ways, your life is also the story of Singapore, because you grew up as a child before Singapore became independent. It becomes independent in 1965 this is actually, I believe, the 60th year of Singapore's independence, exactly right, so that it is especially of a Singapore. And of course, Singapore's rise has been, I mean, I don't think even spectacular describes it. Just some statistics on this for all of us, in 1990 Singapore's GDP was $36 billion today, and 1990 was the end of the Cold War. We, some of us, remember that actually, right? So today's 500 billion, which means that Singapore's population has doubled since then, but it's GDP has grown 14 times. And it's not just about wealth, it's also about creating a kind of governance, a kind of regional leadership, indeed, a kind of a global leadership. So when I see look at all this, and I think of the founding of Singapore, I write about this in your book, quite a bit about these foundational moments, and the founding fathers, s Rajaratnam, Goh, Keng Swee, and, of course, the most famous one, Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore for decades. And you actually write in your book that Lee Kuan Yew was quoting you here, the greatest politician I have dealt with. So the question that I rose in my mind when I was reading about

these leaders, and of course, you interacted with them personally for many, many years yourself. Did Singapore simply luck out with these leaders, and especially with Lee Kuan Yew and how? What did you learn? And you hinted, hinted at this in your in your in what you just said, what did you learn on how leadership can really make a difference for a global south country to break out of the shackles of a challenge, adversity and poverty?

Kishore Mahbubani 8:47

Yes, well, you're absolutely right, and by the way, another remarkable statistic is that when Singapore became independent 60 years ago, in 1965 our per capita income was $500 same as Ghana in Africa, and today it's like $88,000 higher than that of the United States or the United Kingdom. And no other country has traveled from $500 to $88,000 in our lifetime. So that's why the Singapore Story is a very unique one. And I'm glad by when we began by talking about the poverty of Singapore, because it's important to emphasize that we didn't begin with any natural advantages. In fact, we began with many natural disadvantages because we had no hinterland, no resources at all, and on the day when Singapore became independent, the citizens didn't celebrate. The citizens cried because they felt that when a city like Singapore was cut off from Malaysia, the city would shrivel and die. And before that, of course, as you know, Singapore had been a British colony. And one point I emphasize in my book is as it. Child. The other disadvantage I felt was as a child, young Asian child in the British colony, I grew up mentally believing, believing that we Asians, we were psychologically, intellectually, culturally, inferior to the white men. I mean, it's deeply ingrained, you know, that's how Western colonization was so successful because it captured your mind and made you feel you're a second class citizen. Therefore it's natural for the Westerner to rule your country.

So beginning in this very unpromising environment, Singapore literally has shot through the roof in terms of where it has come. And the main reason is that, basically, I'm coming to realize now the three founding fathers of Singapore, whom you mentioned, as you say, the most famous one, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew. But certainly, Singapore's success was never due to one man. It was at least due to two other men and several others, by the way. But the two others were equally critical. Were Dr Guo kings, the economic architect, and Mr. S Roger, the Foreign Minister and geopolitical guest genius, also in the trio. And what I'm coming to realize is that the founding fathers of Singapore, we have been as brilliant as, if not more brilliant than the founding fathers of the United States of America. And I want to emphasize that they were incredible. All three of them were incredible, big thinkers, you know.

And you know, you mentioned that I had written 10 books, and I looking back now, I doubt if I could have written these 10 books if I hadn't, sort of, almost through a process of osmosis, learn some very powerful lessons in geopolitics from three exceptional geopolitical minds. And every time you spoke to them, you immediately realized they were trying to lift, lift you up and take the a big picture helicopter view of what the whole situation was like. They never got mired in the details. They're now interested in the twists and turns. And what he said, what she said, that's all irrelevant. What's important is that you've got to step back, look at the big picture and how the forces are rolling out, and then you then decide, okay, now, how do we position ourselves? What

do we do? How do we take advantage of what's happening? And they were, of course, also very brave thinkers, and they're prepared to do completely unconventional things. And when Singapore became independent 1965 it was at a time when most third world countries were rejecting foreign investment, rejecting American investment, because the year they say yeah, they you're the American capitalist. Will Come on, will come in. They'll suck our blood, you know, take advantage of our labor, and then, you know what, we'll be left with nothing. But Singapore said No, when you get American investments, you get American capital, you get American technology, you get American markets, and actually, most importantly of all, you get American managerial expertise, which trains a whole generation of Singaporeans.

And I can tell you one reason why Singapore has developed very successful entrepreneurs is because these successful entrepreneurs were trained by very, very good American businessmen who came to invest in Singapore. So, you know, I can, I can tell you the Singapore can easily send a thank you note to the United States of America for the tremendous contribution the United States has made in terms of our economic development. And there's one statistic that even now surprises me. You know, Singapore, relatively speaking, is a small economy despite the relatively big size. But compared to China, Japan, South Korea, India, we are so small, and yet United States has invested more in tiny Singapore that it has in China, Japan, South Korea, India combined. Now, obviously this happened for many reasons, but one is that Singapore really laid out the welcome map for American businessmen coming to Singapore, and literally laid out the red carpet and said we provided a one stop, what they call one stop shopping. You go to one place and they'll take care of all the problems you want, whether it's union rights or electricity, export controls, work permits, everything, one shop will take care of everything. And then that explains the the phenomenal success of Singapore, and something that actually the United States has contributed to but the reason why that happened is because these three leaders could also see, then very clearly, the incredible dynamism of the American economy and what how Singapore would benefit by getting closer to it.

Sarang Shidore 14:59

Yeah. Yeah, you write in your book something that struck me, and I reflected upon myself. I mean, I myself grew up in India. I've been here forever, of course, but that great freedom fighters don't necessarily, and often don't make good post independence leaders. So there's something about this generation, and these three leaders in particular, that were not only focused on finding autonomy for Singapore, independence for Singapore, but also then governing it well, and not just for a few years, but for decades and decades to come.

Kishore Mahbubani 15:32

You're right, and but they didn't want them. And so, you know, if I ever get to it, I may not, if I could ever have find the time, I would love to write a book just on these three great leaders, Lee Kuan, yew go, Keng Swee and Roger Anna. But they one reason why they became such strong people is that they went through many searing experiences in their lives, you know. So they were born in the let's say, late 1910s early 1920s so they went through British colonial rule,

which is not very painful, but still, as I said, you're mentally colonized. You through second class, second grade. Then they went through a searing Japanese occupation of Singapore. In fact, Mr. Lee Kuan, you could have lost his life, be killed by some Japanese soldier who were quite brutal in the occupation of Singapore. And then they had to fight both the communist forces, who also appeared to be, you know, on the rampage in Singapore and in Southeast Asia. Then they had to fight the communists, those people who believe that the way you try and win power in Singapore is by trading racial animosities in Singapore. So as a result of going in, going into fight after fight after fight, and I think Singapore's leaders were probably the only leaders who wrote the communist Tiger and got off and killed the tiger, because in most other cases, the communist tiger who take over the non communist partners.

So, you know, Singapore has gone through some remarkable, challenging experiences. And the result of that was, was, was the the generation of three and a few other, I must say, exceptional leaders who could think clearly and see clearly what needed to be done. And they were not just, by the way, thinkers. They were very good doers, and they would make sure that things get done. I mean, one, I can tell you that one of Mr. Lee Kuan Yews most famous statements, which I would use in my staff is Mr. Lee Kuan Yew said, you know, when I get to something I check, I double check, I triple check. Can I check again?

Sarang Shidore 17:51

Yeah, I think I didn't…

Kishore Mahbubani 17:52

Imagine, yeah. Can you imagine if you send him something for his scrutiny, and he would be absolutely brutal, the doctor, go, be absolutely brutal. If you send them something which they smell was rubbish, and they will kill you for it. I mean, they would really just cut you down and say, Don't give me such nonsense. So they were very tough, very tough minded, hard headed leaders.

Sarang Shidore 18:21

Yeah indeed. And you write, write about that particular quote, actually in the book as well, the kind of exacting standards that tells me that came with this, with these leaders, but, but I want to reconnect back to what you said earlier, which is how America was actually a partner. But before that, one thing that just struck me as you, as you were saying, as you were talking, was that, yes, Singapore's history in the Cold War is that of a firm anti communist sort of state in the region, close partner of the United States. But liquor news on philosophy and philosophy of the Singaporean leadership, seems to me, have drawn from the best aspects of socialism and the best aspects of capitalism and fused it in a rather unique way. You don't see that kind of a creative fashioning of these very different strands of economic thought or political thought, done, done so deftly I think anywhere.

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Kishore Mahbubani 19:19

Oh, definitely. I think what is, what this is, why I say that Singapore's leaders were truly exceptional, because they were not also prisoners of any ideology. I mean, there was no doubt that Mr. Lee, Kuan, Yew, Goh, Keng, Swee and Roger, especially when they studied overseas, when they studied in London when they were fighting against British colonial rule. They obviously worked with the socialists, who were also opposed to the imperialists. So they were all in their youth, quite socialist in orientation, quite left wing in orientation. But once they became the leaders of Singapore. It became very pragmatic. And their attitude was, it didn't matter whether it's, you know, left wing or right wing, if it works, we will use it. And that's why they were able to also work very well. These Socialists were able to work very, very well with American capitalists because they had, they believed they had shared common goals in trying to improve the livelihood of the single citizens of Singapore.

But even, by the way, also in geopolitics, even though Singapore was a very close friend of the United States and a partner the United States, it never became an ally of the United States, never because he believed that all great powers, but put their interests first, and never put the interest of their allies first. And so it is best for Singapore to remain a member of the non line movement. And I actually accompanied Mr. Rajaratnam when he went to visit Mr. Gromko, the legendary foreign minister the Soviet Union, in 1976 and Mr. Ajarna made it very clear, you know, we are anti communist at home, but we are non communist in terms of our foreign policy. We are not opposed to communism. So what you do externally, we incorporate anybody. So we welcome American naval vessels in World War Two. We also would welcome Soviet naval vessels Civil War Two, because we didn't want to take sides in the in that contest.

Sarang Shidore 21:28

Right placing strategic autonomy, really, at the heart of Singapore's drive, and for a small state, that's quite interesting. I want to again reconnect to what you said about the United States. You have a long engagement with the us personally. I mean, you write in your book as well. You're posted twice here. You were us, Ambassador to the UN you were deputy chief of mission in the embassy here in Washington, DC. And you spend many years. I think if you sum total the years, it's more easily, more than 10. I believe so. And in the book, your admiration for the United States comes out clearly. It's dynamism, it's openness to immigrant, immigrants and immigration, and also the high quality of some of its diplomats. For example, you you narrate the story of your Cambodian friend sichan Sir, who had a very difficult time in Cambodia under Pol Pot actually escaped the genocide, lost many, many family members. He makes it to the United States as a Cambodian refugee after all those harrowing experiences, and then he ends up being part of George H W Bush's White House. I mean, one of those things only in America, is often the phrase and that really, there are many stories along those lines that sort of walking around all of us in this city and elsewhere.

But then there's also the other side, the long record of these disastrous American wars and moralistic crusades. Lee Kuan Yew himself spoke of America's sense of quote, unquote, divine

mission spread democracy around the world. There were horrific errors of regime change. I mean, you write about how the Cambodian regime change operation in 1970 may have actually opened the door for Pol Pot himself. And then, of course, we had Iraq, and there are so many more examples of that they brought misery to millions. Actually hurt us interests and reputation in the world, I would argue, very much. And this is something we make a point of here at the Quincy Institute as well. So how do you square these two sides of the US? I mean, you know, one way of looking at it is that there are sort of two camps in the US that are at tension with each other. The other way of looking at it is it's part of the same whole that there is a schizophrenic personality in the American way of looking at the world that is very hard to disentangle these two sides. They're fused at the hip, so to speak. What's your own perspective?

Kishore Mahbubani 24:03

Well, by the way, you're absolutely right. The one country in which I spend the most amount of time outside of Singapore is the United States of America. I mean, 10 and a half years in New York, two and a half years in Washington, DC, one year in Harvard, and many other visits and so on so forth. So, I mean, I've grown to like and respect the United States America a great deal. And I also have, I should also add a very important personal note. I also got married twice in the US, so I guess, I guess my heart was pulled to the United States. And incidentally, I was introduced to my wife and by an American diplomat too, to develop deep friendships in the United States. So there's no question that if you are a young aspiring individual who has you know a lot of beings or like Satya Nadella or Sundar Pichai, you can arrive as a young immigrant. Do very, very well in the United States of America. There's no question, but I but at the same time, in terms of its foreign policy, unfortunately, the United States has been making more and more mistakes, and it's a good question to ask why that is the case. But one of the theories I'm developing is that in the Cold War, in one way or another, the Soviet Union act as a major restraint on the United States, and the United States felt that he was in a real competition to win hearts and minds around the world.

And American diplomats actually were in the Cold War, very friendly, oozing with charm and always trying to persuade you that you know the United States was on the right side of history. The Soviet Union was on the wrong side. And in a sense, you had American diplomats, American leaders making an effort to cultivate the world and get to know it, I can tell you, like someone like George Shultz, the Secretary of State, who spent three weeks traveling all around the Asia Pacific region, and someone asking why he's spending three weeks here. He says, I'm taking care of the garden. You got to spend time. You got to meet people. You got to hear them out. You could understand what they think, and so on so forth. So that was the nature of American diplomacy during the Cold War, but unfortunately, when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union ended, I have absolutely no doubt that what brought America down was that America got drowned in hubris. And we all know the famous end of history essay and the most damaging part of the end of history of essay was that it actually made those in United States and the West feel, hey, we won. So from now on, the rest of the world has got to converge

towards us and become like us, liberal democratic societies. And so they have to do all the adjustment adaptations we have arrived. We don't have to change and adapt.

And I spent a year in Harvard in '91, '92 immediately after the end of the Cold War. And I can tell you, the sheer arrogance, complacency of everyone in the United States then was actually quite shocking. And I remember in a discussion with the very famous, a very good man, I must say, a very good man, Stanley Hoffman, one of the best professors in Harvard. And after a discussion on the state of the world, I said, By the way, you know, I don't think the future belongs to the west. I think, you know, Asia is returning, and the 21st century would be the Asian century. And he went almost apoplectic. You know, in his response, you couldn't believe that anyone would say that the West was not going to combine history forever. But the fact that even a great intellectual Citadel like Harvard could be consumed by such arrogance showed that, you know, the end of the Cold War did a lot of damage to the American mind, to the Western mind, because what it did was that it put the Western mind to sleep at precisely the time when Asia, especially China and India, were waking up.

And, you know, I'm shocked that very few Americans know that from the year one to the year 1820 the two largest economies of the world were always those of China and India always and so the past 200 years of Western domination of world history have been a major historical aberration. All aberrations come to a natural end, and at precisely the moment when the aberration was going to come beginning, was going to begin to come to an end, as China and India were waking up, United States and the rest of the world went to sleep. And as a consequence of that, I think many Americans you know, forgot the discipline, forgot the the lessons of the Cold War and stop trying to understand the rest of the world. And so one, one of the things I try to do as a friend of the United States with my books is to say, hey, why don't you step back and see what the rest of the world thinks? Because most of the world, I can tell you, is not anti American, definitely not, but at the same time, they also want to be able to make their own decisions and not be forced to take positions. Because you know, you come along and say, Hey, your government is not good enough. We have to change and adapt your government. I mean that that's arrogant to tell societies with long histories that you know better than them how they should be governed, and that those sorts of sloppy intellectual habits.

Plus, I think, the one other consequence of the end of the Cold War is that you no longer had big picture strategic thinkers, you know, like, you know, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz. So even who sort of realized that what you got to do is look at the whole picture and not just look at sections of it, but you lost these big picture thinkers in the United States. And I think that's part the reason why the United States geopolitically seems to be relatively speaking, we lost in the world.

Sarang Shidore 30:21

Yeah, indeed, you mentioned how most people, large majority of people, in the Global South, in the developing world, are not anti American certainly true. British, French colonial experiences as negative they were, but those are all part of the developing world. But then the American

experience, which did not, by the way, venture out, except for a couple of exceptions, into into territorial colonialism, it was a very different model that the US brought to the table from the Europeans, and that is very much a part of most countries in some cultural form or some economic form of the other so we make this case in the global sub program all the time that to build better relations with this vast space, we have to understand that this space is not an adversary, but it can be a partner, but we are not exactly doing all the things we need to do in the US To make it a durable partner this time.

So now I want to sort of sort of look back and think back in you know, you write about your intellectual journey as you know, you had all these experiences as a diplomat. You were shaping things. You were involved in negotiations, contestations, cooperation. You saw the rise of ASEAN very closely. And you say that you started your life as a young man as an idealistic pacifist, but then over your decades of experience and work, you say that you became a hard headed realist, realizing that the world of International Affairs is, quote, unquote, a jungle. And you also make the point that in this world of international relations, power is far stronger than principle. When you look around you as America first entrenches itself in this country with after the election, my question to you, you is, how can smaller, weaker, I don't say weak, but weaker states in the global south navigate these difficult waters of geopolitics today. What would be your suggestions for, of course, for Singapore, but also for Southeast Asia and the broader global south?

Kishore Mahbubani 32:40

Well, I think you're right. I mean, I, as I explained in my memoirs, when Dr Goh Keng Swee was then a defense minister, offered me a job in the Ministry of Defense, he said, you know, make you, make you join my team of Whiz Kids, and you get promoted very fast. You do very well. Was very enticing, but I then I said to him, very sheepishly, dr, Goh, I'm sorry I can't join the ministry of defense because I'm a pacifist. Now, he looked, he looked at me with total contempt and threw me out of his office. But I ended up in the foreign ministry, and I'm glad I ended up there, because I'm, in a sense, I took the diplomacy quite well. But over the course of the years of working in international affairs and geopolitics, I began to realize, especially after my two years in the Security Council, in the years 2001 2002 that when you get a clash with the power and principle, power always trumps principle. You know it's all these considerations of power will determine the final outcome. Which is why it's very, very important to be geopolitically realistic, you know?

And so when I look at the world today, for example, to get to take a practical example, I'm actually astonished by the geopolitical incompetence of the European Union. And I say this because the European Union, and you know, the Europeans are smart, sophisticated people, you know, they cannot claim they don't know history. Should have realized that they have to learn to live with Russia for the next 100 years. You know, now, of course, many of them, because they got seduced by the end of history argument, believe that they would never have to adapt to Russia, but Russia will, of course, eventually have to change, drop off all its communist autocratic clothing, and become a clone of Western Europe, and then the problem will be

solved. See that that's a completely wrong ahistorical view, and they fail to understand that other societies are going to make their choices and have their own concerns. So when you know, when the Russians consistently protest. That against the expansion of NATO, and they were sending very, very clear signals that if you keep on expanding, I have to react. I have to react. All these warning signals were ignored by the Europeans.

And I can tell you in you know, before Henry Kissinger died, a year before he died, I had a one on one conversation with him in his office, and he was sort of hinting that the Europeans have, in a sense, forgotten the art of doing realistic, long term geopolitical thinking and trying to find out and figure out solutions, win, win solutions for everybody, whenever you have a problem. And so from the in the eyes of the rest of the world, even though they don't approve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, because the Russian invasion of Ukraine is illegal, let's be clear about that. No, the UN Charter is very clear about that, and we cannot approve of it. Yet, when the West imposed sanctions on Russia. 85% of the world's population didn't impose sanctions on Russia. And if I was someone in the West, I would say, excuse me, our goal was to isolate Russia. Do we end up isolating Russia or isolating ourselves? We survey the rest of the world and the Europeans were also massively hypocritical when they criticized the global south for keeping up their ties with Russia, because they themselves were secretly shipping gas, even through Ukraine, into Europe. You know, all of the first three years of the war. I mean, they were lying to the rest of the world, plus the Europeans were also knowingly buying Russian oil, which had been refined in India they knew as Russian oil.

So, I mean, all this hypocrisy is so evident, and therefore it's time for the Europeans, I believe. And I say, this is a friend of Europe. I want Europe to do well. It's time for Europe to wake up and realize that it can. It can enhance its options best by being geopolitically realistic, and carve out a position of strategic autonomy for Europe, where Europe can certainly cooperate very, very closely with the United States, but Europe should retain the option to cooperate closely with any other power he wants to, whether it's Russia, China or India or anyone else. But you know, because you know at the at the end of the day, the thing that's really crazy about this is that the long term threat to Europe doesn't come from Russia or Russian tanks. It comes from the demographic explosion in Africa that is is happening and and in the long you know, in the year 1950 Europe's population was double that of Africa's. Today, Africa's population is two and a half times the size of Europe, by 2100 to be 10 times the size of Europe. So you know clearly what you should do is focus your strategic sites on what's really important.

And the reason I can confidently say that Russia will never be a threat to Europe is because Russia's biggest worry is not Europe. Russia's biggest worry is that its longest border is with China. And remember this during the Cold War. So even was up here, China was down here, and the Soviet Union was kicking China around, excuse me, and they almost came to war in 69 now today, the situation has changed. China is here. Russia is here. You think Russia wants to take a fight with Europe? I mean, if the Europeans had any kind of strategic common sense, they would say, hey, Russia has got bigger worries. Now, let me find a way of dealing with Russia in such a way that I don't alienate them, and I can focus on what I'm doing, because they know, you mentioned that the goal of the Quincy institute is to prevent wars, and you know, I've

also launched something called the Asian Peace program to try and prevent wars in Asia. The thing that's sad is that if the European said any kind of geopolitical realism, or they had the quality of mind of Lee Kuan, yew go, King Swee, Roger Nam, they could have easily prevented the Ukraine war. So it was sheer geopolitical incompetence that has led to this Ukraine war.

Sarang Shidore 39:40

A note for the audience, please drop in your questions on the chat. We'll be picking them up shortly and incorporating them into this excellent conversation. So Kishore, I take your points. In fact, there's no question that the Russian invasion was illegal. I mean. We have made this point many times in our writings. There are no two ways to describe it, but there is a history and a context here. And I always wonder about even for the United States, of course, for the for the allies, it's a question, but those states that become allies of a great power, Singapore chose not to become a treaty ally of the United States, but there are bunch of states that chose to sign those treaties with the US, and arguably it was good for the US during the Cold War, but this lopsided end of the Cold War and the creation of these temptations to sort of run unilateralism amok, so to speak, that even affects the Allies comes back to bite the US itself as well.

So in a sense that there is a enlightened interest for the United States not to kind of crush strategic autonomy of everyone, and for the allies themselves to carve out some strategic autonomy, because I think at the end of the day, and I think you're sort of hinting at that too, it's better for all concerned. It makes for a more stable international system, and the US will can only prosper with more stability, more instability. Instability in the world is bad for bad for Americans. So you mentioned your Asian Peace program. And that's very important point, actually, because you're trying to, and I think when you introduced it, you, you, you gave the paddle of of acupuncture, a small needle that can, you know, catalyze something. So, so tell us a little bit about this initiative that you're running in in Singapore.

Kishore Mahbubani 41:38

Yeah, just just before I get to the Asian Peace program, I want to just quickly add, know, your point about even the United States. I mean, the there's, you know, the Europeans today are terrified by the election of Donald Trump, because Donald Trump believes that his mission is to make MAGA, make America great again, and not mega not make Europe great again. So he's quite openly, blatant in about saying that, hey, you know, I don't care about you Europeans. I want to take care of myself first. So the Europeans should have anticipated this. They should have considered, no, you must. Whenever you take on long term geopolitical analysis, you cannot just have one scenario, the best case scenario, and say, I'm going to work out my long, my long term strategic plans on the basis the best case scenario. No, no, you gotta give a medium case scenario and a worst case scenario. The worst case scenario will be, America elects a relatively isolationist president, says, I'm not going to pay a penny for the Ukraine war. I mean, that could have been, they could have been. They could have thought of that, and they should have said, Hey, do our plans make any sense against the worst case scenario at all? They never did that.

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See is the lack of the kind of thinking that Dr Goh, Keng Swee, we call on you and Roger Ana would have done if they were asked to do an analysis before the Ukraine war. Now, in the case of Asia, I can tell you that one of the greatest achievements of Asia that unfortunately, most people in the world don't appreciate is that there has been, there's been, there have been no major interstate wars in Asia for 46 years. And what's remarkable is that there'd be no major interstate wars in in Asia for 46 years, despite the fact that the biggest geopolitical shifts in the world, they're not happening Europe. They're not happening in Africa. They're not happening Latin America. They're happening in East Asia. So despite the fact that we have a region of major geopolitical shifts, we've had peace for 46 years, and I can tell you that must be some deeper cultural and intellectual reasons why peace is prevailing in this region.

And sometimes we got to know what is bringing this about. And I have no doubt. For example, just to cite one complete example of an organization that I wish more Americans would know about, which is our Association of Southeast Asian Nations ASEAN, which, by the way, was created as a pro American organization in the Cold War, and was his creation was denounced by both Moscow and Beijing. So started off as a pro American organization, and yet the United States dumped ASEAN at the end of the Cold War and forgot about it. Hey. But in the meantime, while the United States was focused elsewhere, ASEAN was quietly building a sense of community, not just in Southeast Asia, but also among all its Asian neighbors, who would come every year to attend ASEAN meetings at the foreign minister level, at the summit level, and quite often, when Asian leaders quarrel and they couldn't talk to each other bilaterally, they. You solve the problem, you attend an ASEAN meeting, and then you can talk to each other.

And you know, within ASEAN, you know, Indonesia has injected the jassam Javanese concepts of what is, what a good Javanese is called mushawara and MUFA, which means consultation and consensus. So one reason why you've had no wars in Southeast Asia, even though Southeast Asia is the most diverse region of planet Earth, you know, out of the 670 million people in Southeast Asia, you have 250 million Muslims, 100 and 50 million Christians, 100 and 50 million Buddhist, Mahayana, Buddhist, Hinayana, Buddhist. You have Taoists, confucianists, you have Hindus, and you have lots of communists too in Southeast Asia. So if there's any place where you should see a war, it should be Southeast Asia. But guess what, no major wars in 46 years. Now, this cannot just be a fluke. This cannot just be an accident. It has to be a result of human intervention. And I spent 33 years attending ASEAN meetings, and I know that the personal relationships that were developed as a result of this hundreds. In fact, every year there's 1000 ASEAN meetings a year. This personal relationship. This personal networking is so important.

And just to, just to make a very critical point here, even when the countries disagree with each other. You know, for example, Philippines still claims the state in Malaysia. Incidentally, Philippines in Malaysia have normal relations and continue to cooperate, whereas, you know, by contrast, the United States with a very strange reversal of the basic principle of diplomacy, United States says, I won't establish diplomatic relations with you unless you my friend. But hang on, diplomacy was invented not to enable you to talk to your friends. Diplomacy was invented to enable you to talk to your enemies, because only an enemy courts would chop your

heads off. And therefore, what do you do? You create diplomatic immunity. So when you establish diplomatic relations, it means I don't trust you, I don't trust you. So I want, I want, I want, I want diplomatic immunity before I come and talk to you. So logically, diplomacy was invented to enable you to talk to enemies, and United States, once it defines an enemy, should establish diplomatic relations with it, whether it's Iran, North Korea, Cuba, whoever, Venezuela, but United States says, no, no, you must be my friend first. No, I can't figure out. How is it that such a sophisticated country like the United States of America doesn't understand the ABC or diplomacy, but we in Asia do. And in Asia, even if you hate each other, you still talk to each other.

Sarang Shidore 47:51

Yeah, lots there to chew on. I think, if I can offer a personal note, I think really the there's a tradition of American diplomats that have played the kind of roles that you are describing, and been very strategic and wise, I would say. But somewhere along the line, the temptations of moralism and extreme, I'm not saying moral codes, but moralism, which is a different thing, sort of getting into a deep ideological crusade, seeing an adversary as completely without any possible possibility of redemption, that creates a dynamic where you sort of say, well, we don't need any interactions we can sanction to and that will and the behaviors will change. Well, the record is that they haven't changed very much through just course, it means that you need a much smarter tool, tool kit.

Kishore Mahbubani 48:47

I'll just quickly add a point there, very important point. You know, the 21st century will be very different from any of the previous centuries. These are one suspect 19/20, century. As I said, the past 200 years, you had one dominant civilization, Western civilization. The 21st century will be characterized by what I call three M's, multi civilizational, multi polar and multi lateral, meaning you got to have lots of meetings for people to resolve all these things. Now, the reason why you will have this multi civilizational, multipolar, multilateral world is that you got to learn to deal with societies. What not like you at all, right? What the opposite of you? And you know, one reason why American diplomacy has run into a ditch and European diplomacy has run into a ditch. Is because when they, when they soon as they come across a society which is not like them, which is different from them, they immediately say, no, no, no, something is wrong with you. I gotta impose sanctions on you. You're not right. You know you're not like me.

But in Asia, we say, no, no, we have I know you're very different. You. And I'm very different from you, but then we must understand each other. I must understand what's important to you, and you must understand what's important to me, and then we figure out a solution whereby we can live with each other right now that that's something is quite basic that most Western diplomats have stopped doing, because whenever they have a problem, let me, I give you a case you have a problem country in Southeast Asia. It's Myanmar. It's going to take some time to resolve it. It's a wicked problem. But what are you what is the best do whenever it's a problem, you impose sanctions. What was what was sanctions? Achieve nothing. Have

sanctions ever change any country, never. So why don't you just continue talking to people at the end, they're trying to find a compromised solutions. And that, I think, is that is something that the Asians have developed, that I think the West should come and learn from. You know?

I mean, look, I'll give you a simple example. You know, you have this Kosovo problem that you fought the war over, right? So you separated Kosovo from Serbia NATO did, and then you have this independent territory which still can't get into the UN and has no status, and so on so forth. You know, Indonesia had the same problem. It had, it had a region called East Timor, which separated, right? So, in theory, Indonesia and East Timor should now be at loggerheads like Kosovo and Serbia. You know what? Indonesia and Timor, let's say love each other. I'm not exaggerating. The chief sponsor of Timor's admission into ASEAN is Indonesia. So, you know, we, we are clearly doing some things right in Asia as a result of being very careful, pragmatic and doing the best to treat each other with the utmost respect and never give condescending lectures or insult leaders in one of the worst things that the Anglo Saxon media does is to constantly insult leaders, Xi Jinping, Putin, whoever you know. Excuse me, who gave you the right to insult these leaders? Who? Who do you think you are? So this is a result of 200 years of cultural condescension from the 19th and 20th century flowing into the 21st century, where it's going to hit a big heart wall and beat too many cracked heads in places like Europe.

Sarang Shidore 52:49

Yeah. And indeed, Down East Timor, Martin Natalegawa, was a former foreign minister of Indonesia, has laid out a logic for how Indonesia has become the biggest supporter of East Timor's admission and is bringing into the communities of nations and so forth, exactly. So there's a lot of thinking there actually behind, behind this. And it's not a What strikes me in ASEAN states. It's not naive dukudism. This is a very pragmatic interest based conclusion that benefits Indonesia. It benefits East team or two, but it actually also benefits Indonesia. And that's, I think that's the ingredient missing.

I'm going to combine, since you're sort of running out of time, I'm going to bring in two questions and combine them from the audience. The first is from Ambassador Piper Campbell, and she writes, I'm going to read this question out to you, your comments about us, behavior being essentially moderated by Russia during the Cold War resonate with me. However, why isn't the US competition with China playing the same role now current US actions, example, threatening tariffs, withdrawing from various organizations seem designed to push countries, especially those of Southeast Asia away. How do you diagnose this? That is the first question. The second one is from Tedford Tyler, who asked, What would would be a two top recommendations to the Trump administration on Southeast Asia policy, what could they do? What perhaps they couldn't do?

Kishore Mahbubani 54:19

Well, the first question Ambassador Piper Campbell is right. In theory, United States should be behaving as cautiously in its competition with China as it was with the Soviet Union. And here, I

think the United States is seriously underestimating China. Because it won the Cold War. I am amazed that so many American diplomats believe that, just like the Soviet Union collapse, China is going to collapse. No problem. But you know, and I think another incidental reason, which is not so incidental, is that the Russian. Had 10,000 nuclear weapons, I think, in the nuclear world in the Cold War, the Chinese, unfortunately, only have 250 but as you know, the Chinese are going up slowly.

And this is where I think it's so unwise for the United States not to engage in a solid, you know, a stable relationship with China, then you remove the incentive for China to increase its nuclear weapons from 200 to 6000 now, the Chinese can easily develop 6000 nuclear weapons. I show you that. I think, unfortunately, only when they do so then the United States, oh, my God, we have a real challenge here. What do we do? Then they might begin to have real discussions with China. So all the efforts, I mean, look at the entire four years of the Biden administration is containment policy. You know, whatever it is, all the orcas and all these things were designed, we're going to fail anyway. You cannot succeed in containing China. That's what my book has China, one tries to point out very clearly. So therefore, there's some fundamental mistakes in the assumptions with which United States approaches China.

The second question on Southeast Asia, I think the best thing that I hope the Trump team will realize is that as they look around the world and they try to find places in the world where there's still genuine, deep reservoirs of goodwill towards United States, paradoxically, one of the regions is Southeast Asia, as I said, ASEAN was created As a poor American organization, and as you know, United States has invested a lot in Southeast Asia and Singapore and Southeast Asia. This is actually generating a lot of income, wealth and jobs for Americans too. So come and see how you can work out a pragmatic arrangement, win, win arrangement with ASEAN that can serve as a model for other regions of the world. At the end of the day, the Trump administration just cannot go to every region and say, Hey, if you don't follow me, I'll impose sanctions on you. I'll impose tariffs on you. I mean, that's not the way you win friends. Over the long term, you can do that maybe with countries that you really believe are cheating you I don't think Canada and Mexico are cheating United States, frankly, but don't, don't. Don't use that with countries that can be your potential friends, you know.

And at the end of the day, the goal of diplomacy is to find a win win solution. And I hope that somebody will try to inject the words Win Win solutions into the dialog and discourse of the Trump administration people. I think it's certainly in the first six months they'll go around doing this battering, which unfortunately, is going to lead to lots of loss of goodwill in many parts of the world. So I would suggest, seriously, to the Trump administration, try to find one or two areas of the world where you can develop a positive agenda, show positive results, and then say, show the rest of the world. You see, you can work with us, and you can find Win Win solutions for this thing. So I would say, use Southeast Asia as the place to establish a win win model within United States and a region of the world.

Sarang Shidore 58:33

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Right, so let's end this, because we are almost out of time, but let's end this on a bit of a more personal note, you know, going back to your your early, early decades or early years. And you know, if you look back now from where you're at, you know, from the outside before I got to know you much better over the years, I saw your life as just being one unbroken streak of successes, so many things done. But of course, in your memoir, you write about the setbacks too. You had significant setbacks. You had to overcome them, both in your career as well as your personal life. And in all of this, your tenacity comes through in the book, but also the role model that was your mother. Your mother really looms very large in the book. So in fact, you you have a very memorable quote there that I will never forget. And you talk of how your mother told you when you're a child and sometimes there wouldn't be enough food to say they told you to that even if you are hungry, this is a quote, even if you're hungry, don't show it. Put butter on your lips and smile at the world. Unquote. So please tell us a little bit more about how your mother was and what she was like.

Kishore Mahbubani 59:47

Well, yeah, yeah, absolutely right. I mean, looking back, one reason why I wrote the memoirs is that, you know, to try and understand what happened in my life. And became very clear. That, you know, there's no way I could have ever failed in my life, because I, as I watched all the hell that my mother went through. I remember she never had a university education. She didn't have relatives in Singapore, she didn't have friends in Singapore, she came as a single person and had to deal with her husband. Was an alcoholic, a gambler, drunkard, who went to became a con went to jail eventually. So she went through hell, but she never broke down. And so to me, I always told myself, if my mother who went through hell never broke down, how can I possibly break down? And I must say, you're remembering her on a very important day, because today, 12 February is the death anniversary of my mother. She passed away on 12 February, 1998 so I can tell you that as I wrote the memoirs, it became clear to me, it's reflecting my life, that she was the key reason why I have been so successful in my life. And in fact, Martin Wu gave me a wonderful blurb for this. My book said to me, Kishore, after reading your memoirs, it became clear to me that the real hero in the memoirs is your mother.

Sarang Shidore 1:01:17

Indeed, indeed, we should all remember our mothers and fathers always whatever we do. And I want to thank you, Kishore for sharing so many insights with us on the big canvas, on the small canvas at all levels. To all that are watching, please get hold of the book and read it. It's it's a great read and quite insightful into many aspects of of the region, as well as how how it changed, and, of course, how Kishore played a role in it. And before I let you all go, I just want to mention that we have many webinars coming up at the Quincy Institute. They're all on our website. Quincy Institute org. You can go there register, sign up, and you can also subscribe to the Quincy Institute mailing list from our home page. So thank you again, Kishore for Thank you, sir. Thank you for having me. Yes. And thank you to all those who are watching and let us continue this conversation in the coming months and years.