

**ESADE**

Ramon Llull University

ESADEgeo-CENTER  
FOR GLOBAL ECONOMY  
AND GEOPOLITICS

**E**

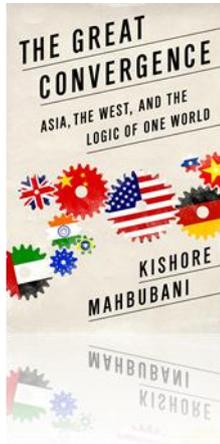
**35**

**Book reviews  
on global economy  
and geopolitical  
readings**

*ESADEgeo, under the supervision of Professor Javier Solana  
and Professor Javier Santiso.*



# The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World



**Mahbubani, Kishore, (2013), Public Affairs, New York.**

*“500 million Asians enjoy middle-class living standards. By 2020 this number will explode to 1,75 billion.”*

*“Today, the massive forces unleashed by globalization are creating a new global civilization.”*

*“The world will not end when America becomes number two. Nor will it end when two centuries of Western domination of the world order come to a natural end.”*

## Summary

Kishore Mahbubani gives an optimistic view of the new world order, characterised by a rise in the middle classes, especially in Asia, forecasted to grow from the current 500 million to 1.75 billion in 2020. This new, wealthier and better-trained population has different needs and is more connected and more aware of its role in the world. It will create a global civilisation and lead what the author calls 'The Great Convergence', in which interdependence and the interrelationship of states will be both inevitable and a vital. This will also apply to the West in general and the United States in particular. Here, Mahbubani sees America as the main obstacle to creating the requisite theoretical framework and to carrying out much-needed reforms to international bodies.

Despite the hope held out by this new global reality based on global policies and shared ethics, the author is worried how the United States will react in 2020, when it is overtaken as the world's greatest economic power by China. America has not prepared its citizens for this and although the nation has cordial and productive trade relations with China, the psychological blow may have consequences for the world as a whole.

With regard to the UN Security Council, Mahbubani proposes a blueprint including 21 members – seven permanent, seven semi-permanent and seven elected— with a view to increasing representativeness and thus spurring 12% of the world's population (the West) to cede power to the remaining 88%.

## The author

**Kishore Mahbubani** is a writer, professor and former Singaporean diplomat who was the country's ambassador to the United Nations twice. He is currently dean of the Lee Kuan School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. Mahbubani has published three books and numerous articles in newspapers and publications throughout the world, including *Foreign Policy*, *The Financial Times*, *Foreign Affairs*. In 2005, 2010 and 2011, he was included in *Foreign Policy's* list of the top 100 global thinkers.

## Key ideas and opinion

**Over the last thirty years, the world has undergone greater changes than over the previous three centuries.** That unquestionable truth is the starting point for Kishore Mahbubani's analysis of what he terms 'The Great Convergence', a process the world is already undergoing and which he argues will accelerate over the next few years. The forces of globalisation have created a new global civilisation in which much of the world's citizens have seen a huge improvement in their standard of living (500 million Asians have joined the middle classes, a figure that will rise to 1.75 billion by 2020). Peace is another feature of this new world order, in which 20<sup>th</sup> century concepts such as the nation-state no longer have any value.

**The author argues that the world's 193 countries are now all in the same boat whereas before they might have been likened to separate ships each sailing its own course and with its own captain and crew.** We therefore all need to care for the vessel and pursue common objectives because if the ship sinks, all nations will go down with her. The new strategy requires a change of mindset by the West in general and the United States in particular — which is used to only pursuing its own interests and considering itself the world's outright, perpetual leader. This blindness leaves America unprepared for 2016, which is when China will overtake the United States as the world's biggest economy.

The author's argues that the great convergence will require **a new theoretical framework of global governance and renewal of international bodies** (especially the UN Security Council), which is mainly run by Western nations representing just 12% of the world's population. The remaining 88% of the world's peoples need to be given a greater voice to achieve the same footing as the Western world.

### A new global civilisation

Mahbubani begins his book by stating **he takes an optimistic view of the world** — something he repeats on several occasions. He highlights the positive aspects of this brave, **convergence-driven new world**:

- ⊕ There are **fewer wars and combat deaths**: the risk of war between the superpowers has never been lower because the interdependence between them has grown too great. Nowadays, they simply have too much to lose by going to war.
- ⊕ **Extreme poverty is on the ebb.**
- ⊕ The world population is better educated and thus more intelligent and informed. We have the **best-educated population in history**: Harvard, Yale and Stanford have trained a generation of foreigners who apply what they have learnt in their home countries. Education might be likened to a benign virus spreading across the world.
- ⊕ The **middle class is much bigger** than it was. In 2020 over half the world's middle class will reside in Asia.

On several occasions, Mahbubani praises **ASEAN** (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) **as an example of a body capable of dealing with the consequences of the new world order**. He considers ASEAN shows remarkable ability to achieve consensus and involve all the powers in the region. Overall, multilateralism is now the prevailing force in negotiations between states, and **Mahbubani argues that despite American insistence to the contrary, unilateralism is doomed to vanish**.

### The need for a 'one world' theory

Mahbubani warns of **the urgent need to devise a global theory of governance to provide a common, effective answer to the challenges facing the world**. Here, the author takes extracts from speeches by former leaders Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Tony Blair, all of whom openly advocate for the notion of consensus but none of whom turned practice into theory while in office, where votes are won by pursuing short-term national objectives. Hence the need to create a theoretical framework based on the same **four principles on which 'The Great Convergence' rests**, namely:

1. The **environment**: the richest countries must shoulder a greater part of the burden in the battle to stop global warming. The problem here is that the world powers take decisions based on models created in 1945, when each nation 'ran its own ship'.
2. **The economy**: the G20 focuses on its short-term interests without realising that the world's common economic good is inextricably linked to that of the individual. As an example, Mahbubani points to the fall of the Euro, caused by failure to analyse how the currency forms part of the global economy. On the other hand, America's unilateral economic decisions are having dangerous consequences for the world as a whole. A common theory would help avoid such situations.
3. **Technology**: with an ever-faster internet and more 'smart' phones, information reaches people in an instant, creating a population that is well informed on what is going on in the rest of the world.
4. **Common dreams**: When all the world's people hold the same material aspirations, this creates a common interest in working towards better standards

E of living. Common values have been created that serve as a shared ethical basis for both rulers and the ruled, who are subject to the same laws. The US does not observe international law and breaks treaties whenever it likes — something that harms American interests.

## Global irrationality is the greatest hurdle

Mahbubani criticises **the West as the greatest obstacle to world uniting and preparing effectively for the great convergence**. According to him, the West in general and the US in particular has gone on to automatic pilot, failing to change its strategies, engendering irrationality stemming from outdated ideas and policies. The examples he cites are the United Nations, the WHO (World Health Organisation), and the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). In all of them, the West acts as a hegemon, even a tyrant, never seeking, as intended, the common good. **Mahbubani argues that the West has done its utmost to besmirch the UN and undermine its organisation** in order to stay in control. He argues the cuts to its budget are absurd given the growing number of fires it is tasked with putting out. With regard to the IAEA, he says the contradictions are self-evident, given that much more is spent yearly arms control than on nuclear safety — something he considers to be mind-bendingly stupid. Furthermore, **the United States demands others disarm but continues to arm itself to the teeth** in a world that — paradoxically — is increasingly pacific.

The United Nations is in need of intelligent investment, but mainly of an end to the dictatorship exercised by the five countries (the so-called P5) able to veto resolutions in The Security Council. This, according to Mahbubani, is the true source of the organisation's problems. **The author even compares the superiority and dictatorial power wielded by the P5 with that enjoyed by Hosni Mubarak (the former Egyptian President), warning that the world's high and mighty never see the end coming.**

## The seven contradictions of global power to be borne in mind

In this chapter, Mahbubani recalls that convergence also implies divergence and in this case, **the following seven contradictions need to be borne in mind:**

1. Global interest versus national interest;
2. The West versus the rest;
3. Existing superpowers versus emerging superpowers: basically China versus the US;
4. The expansion of China in a shrinking world: China must be careful that its expansionist strategy does not lead to rejection by other countries;
5. Islam versus the West: the only real example of the 'clash of civilisations' stems from misunderstandings by both cultures;

6. The world's environment versus global consumption. A rise in living standards means a rise in the number of consumers and hence, deterioration of the world's eco-systems. Striking a balance will be one of the main policy challenges;
7. Governmental organisation versus non-governmental organisation.

## Geopolitics and convergence

In the geopolitical field, the relationship between China and the United States will be of the greatest importance for the world. **The year 2020 will mark the first time in 200 years that a non-European power is the world's biggest economy.** Historically, such changes were preceded by war but it looks unlikely the same will apply this time round. Convergence has led to growing interdependence between the two nations from which both benefit, while competition remains high. For Mahbubani, it is vital that both countries do not overstep the mark and that America begins to accept the idea of being number two. **Unlike China, America has no strategy for dealing with its rival and has ignored the danger to its hegemony.** It has also failed to prepare its citizens for losing 'top dog' status and insists on a story of everlasting American supremacy that is patently false. When the day comes, China will become America's whipping boy and be accused of having cheated on its way to the top. China may well suffer the consequences of such arrogance.

**Another focus of convergence is the relationship between China and India.** Both emerging powers will have to put their territorial disputes behind them and join forces — as they have at various summits — to oppose those (the US) who would burden them with the lion's share of costs in fighting **climate change**. This subject, the need to **maintain stability in the region** and **protect shipping routes** will be some of the points inviting collaboration between these new global powers, notwithstanding their rivalry.

## Barriers to convergence

Some 88% of the world's citizens dwell outside the West and want the same standards of living and peace enjoyed by those in Europe and America. That is why the most brilliant seek education in Western universities. This should make it easier for the 88% to be accepted in the West, which nevertheless still seems to find it hard to treat them as equals. **This senseless superiority complex is a hang-over from colonial times.** Consequently, Mahbubani strongly criticises the kind of development aid endorsed by the West, whose sole purpose is to further the interests of donors, not of beneficiaries.

To sustain his accusation, Mahbubani cites the **failure of the OECD, whose aid — he argues — only benefits those giving it. Moreover, when the aid programs fail, it is the receptors who take the blame.** He goes on to say that the OECD is useless, even for donors, given that most of the aid is wasted. He states **it would be better to shut down the OECD and spend the money on think tanks and public policy schools in the developing world.** Among of the many anecdotes peppering the book is one of his

E meeting with Richard Holbrooke, advisor to the US Secretary of State for Asia and The Pacific, who admitted his mission was to remind USAID officials that the main purpose of American foreign aid was to further American interests, not to do the world a favour. The author goes so far as to make the following calculation: **for each dollar given by the OECD in foreign aid, 20 cents goes to administrative costs, 20 cents to external consultants and 30 to 40 cents to the equipment and services provided by the donor country. If the recipient nation is lucky, it gets between 20 to 30 cents of each dollar.** The same lack of independence and incompetence, argues the author, also applies to the IMF and the World Bank, both of which are dominated by the West and neither of which have had a director from outside the US or Europe.

## Global governance

To sum up, Mahbubani makes recommendations for dealing with 'The Great Convergence'; first and foremost **redesigning international bodies so that they represent all countries, not only the West.**

**American efforts to weaken the UN** and to retain control over it do not serve the interests of others or even those of the United States itself. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for reformulated guidelines for global governance. Most of the world's population is more educated and wealthier than ever before; they actually want to feel represented by these organisms. That is why a key issue to be addressed is **the UN Security Council veto, which is the only reason why the US remains a member.** The P5 ignore any proposal which undermines their power and they freely use their veto to further their own interests, thus undermining the UN mission. **National interests are always put before any global emergency,** no matter how grave it is. An example of this is the Security Council's disastrous reaction to the genocide in **Ruanda.** The spirit of the P5 is contrary to the rule of law and it never pays for its appalling failings.

With all of the foregoing in mind, Mahbubani makes **proposals to reform the UN Security Council** in which there are, inevitably, winners and losers. The **main loser is Europe,** which must yield ground to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Mahbubani suggests a new Council with **seven permanent members:** the US, China and Russia would retain their seats but, he argues, the UK and France should logically give up theirs, with Europe as a whole being given just one seat representing the entire continent. The three remaining seats would be occupied by Asia, Africa and Latin America, with one apiece. It would, he says, be fair for Asia to have two permanent seats, given that it makes up 55% of the world population. India, Nigeria and Brazil would thus complete the list. **These seats would also imply greater responsibilities, such as paying at least 5% to 8% of the total UN budget and being required to immediately deploy troops anywhere there is a threat of genocide.**

Mahbubani also notes that other losers in this restructuring — such as Egypt, South Africa or Mexico — would obviously kick up a fuss. To solve these problems, he



proposes **seven semi-permanent seats, held for two years each, for which only the 28 richest countries would be eligible**: nine in Asia and the Pacific, seven in Africa and Western Europe, four from Latin America and one from Eastern Europe, reflecting, as he sees it, the real weight of each region in the new world order. The last component of the redesign would be **seven elected seats**, vied for by all other states. This reform, argues Mahbubani, **would make the scheme more dynamic; the design would face revision every decade**. The biggest hurdle to its adoption, argues the author, is the United States (which is unwilling to yield any power) and of course **the United Kingdom and France**. **The consolation Mahbubani offers the two European powers is that a burden would be lifted from their shoulders and that they could take comfort in having a European representative leading a united continent**. These are weak arguments that are unlikely to convince any of the affected powers.