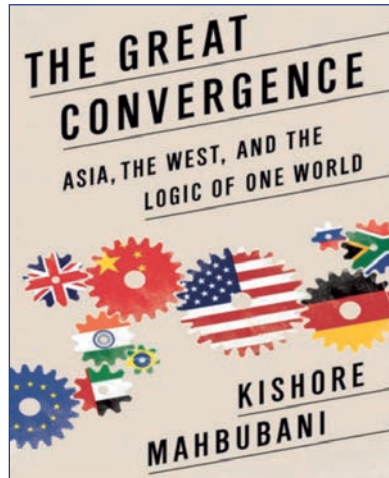


Book Review



Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World*, (New York: Public Affairs), 2013, 315 pages

By **MAJ Phua Chao Rong, Charles**

VISION OF 'ONE-NESS': INSIGHTS ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS BY AN HONEST AND PRAGMATIC VISIONARY.

Since time immemorial, knowledge was divided into Arts versus Science; Research methods into Qualitative vs Quantitative; The world into West vs non-West (the geographical word Asia, or precisely Asia Minor, was coined to depict countries beyond Europe). Such linguistic terms in either/or binary opposites demonstrated the influence on philosophical dualism in modern day knowledge enterprises. In *The Great Convergence*, Kishore, the only Singaporean in the Top 50 World Thinkers (Prospect Magazine, UK), challenged conventional wisdom to advocate for philosophical One-ness. A philosopher by training, this book exposes the flawed logic of false dichotomies in knowledge-making and argues that the world is converging: "With globalisation comes a peaceful new

globalisation." His masterful piece depicts how our world has seen more positive change in the past 30 years than the past 300 years. But he also cautioned the need for a reconfiguration of the world order in order for the new peaceful global civilisation to emerge.

A NEW NORMAL

Kishore starts his thesis with an analytical description of a new normal in International Relations (IR), or in his own words, "A New Global Civilisation" whereby there are (1) fewer wars and combat deaths, (2) steady decline in absolute poverty and its effects and (3) a more educated world population with more people joining the middle class especially in India and China.¹ If education level is an indication of a country's projected power, then the fact that "In 2008, China overtook the US as the world leader in the number of doctoral degrees awarded in the natural sciences

and engineering,” is a significant trend.² Using constructivist logic, this New Global Civilisation is powered by increasingly common patterns of behaviour adopted by most countries in varying degrees with the exception of North Korea: (1) acceptance of modern science, (2) reliance on logical reasoning, (3) embrace of free-market economics, (4) transformation of social contract between ruler and ruled and (5) increasing focus on multilateralism.³ Interestingly for the latter, Kishore asserted American policymakers' disdain for multilateralism and contrasted it with Tony Blair's 'muscular multilateralism', Bill Clinton's 'call for a rules-based global order' and his diplomatic observations of multilateralism at work, where bringing people together increases both communication and understanding.⁴ Arguing rhetorically, a good Law of the Sea Treaty can be negotiated by more than 180 ambassadors. There is no reason why a Law of Planet Earth Treaty cannot be negotiated to manifest multilateralism in action. This argument by precedence is powerful.

GRAND THESIS OF 'ONE WORLD'

His next chapter 'A Theory of One World' can be considered a normative theory-building effort using speeches advanced by practitioners of International

Relations—Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Noting that International Relations (Global) Theory has not yet caught up with global practice, Kishore distilled several pillars for theory-building: (1) environmental to find a common solution to global warming, (2) economic to manage this single global economy through continuous coordinated global responses beyond own short-term and narrow national interests, (3) technology's impact on human consciousness and (4) common aspirations to have basic material standards of living, education and rule of law.⁵

GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS OF A SINGAPORE-STYLE PRAGMATIC IDEALIST

The suggestions by Kishore in subsequent chapters revealed the pragmatic and visionary tendencies of other world-renown Singaporean writers a la Lee Kuan Yew and Tommy Koh.⁶ Perhaps a tendency of a pragmatic idealist is to see the world beyond apparent contradictions and dichotomies. To them, there is no one (ideological) solution and that there are many ways, involving complex trade-offs, to skin a cat whereby “nuanced policies are more effective than black-and-white postures.”⁷ This anti-dualism and flexibility of thought sets the foundation for the epistemology of “Singapore-style pragmatism”.⁸

In “Seven Global Contradictions”, Kishore delineated prima facie contradictions: (1) Global Interests vs National Interests, (2) West vs Rest, (3) World's Greatest Power vs World's Emerging Power, (4) Expanding China vs Shrinking World, (5) Islam vs West, (6) Global Environment vs Global Consumer and (7) Governments vs Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). However, what is implied is that contradictions need not be in Manichaeian gridlock and therein lies the “Power of &,”⁹: if the West is willing to share power in global institutions, then the stage belongs to West & Rest, Global & National Interests to ensure economic prosperity and environmental sustainability, Governments & (NGOs) working hand-in-hand towards an 'international good life.' Kishore's pragmatic idealist thoughts in geopolitics is more clearly articulated in 'Will Geopolitics Derail Convergence': US & China can work on many geopolitical opportunities as long as US observes China's redlines and vice versa. China & India are not born arch-rivals and many collaborative elements and long term interests abound. Similarly, Islam and the West could resolve their differences in the way ASEAN managed to maintain some stability and harmony despite having major world religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism) represented.¹⁰

CONTRIBUTIONS TO INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

As Dean of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), Kishore's primarily IR piece has also indirectly contributed to the discourse of International Public Management (IPM).¹¹ If the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) represents the elected representatives of 'world government' and the UN Secretariat as the international bureaucracy, then Kishore's suggested reforms in UN add to this IPM literature: (1) 7-7-7 formula for 7 permanent for major powers, 7 semi-permanent for middle powers and 7 elected seats for small states in UNSC to better represent the new power balance, need for a 'voice' for middle-small states and to enable the greater adherence to the rule of law, (2) permanent members should pay more to reflect their privileged status and agree to be ultimate "police and fire departments"¹², (3) meritocracy in selection of heads of all multilateral institutions¹³ and (4) development of a global ethic,¹⁴ our sense of moral obligation to each other, so as to build the code of conduct, ethos and values to guide the international bureaucracy and organisations (elected apparatus). Interestingly, these suggestions are very Singaporean in nature if we contrast it with key tenets of Singapore's governance

articulated in *Dynamic Governance*: incorruptibility, meritocracy, rationality, pragmatism, results-oriented and usage of economic incentives and markets to policies.¹⁵

IMPORTANCE OF PRACTITIONER-BASED WRITINGS IN IR

In conclusion, Kishore's latest book, in addition to his *New Asian Hemisphere* and *Beyond the Age of Innocence*,¹⁶ adds to the increasing repertoire of practitioner-based writings in the field of IR. While the chapter on "A Theory of One World" or rather the entire thesis might not fulfil the rigid standards of rigour required of academic theories, i.e. "theory must seek to explain cause-effect relationships and that all generalised casual inferences should reduce possible threats to statistical conclusion validity, internal validity, construct validity, and external validity."¹⁷ Notwithstanding, his work represents a resounding critique of theorists who are lagging behind practitioners in theorising IR. Indeed, the field of IR was founded by practitioners (politicians and diplomats) in 1919 with the first Woodrow Wilson Chair at Aberystwyth, University of Wales, and key IR texts then were practitioners' theorisation of IR.¹⁸ Since then, numerous 'academic' theories flooded the field, from realism to liberalism, behaviouralist turn, neo-realist

and neo-liberal variants, critical theory, constructivism, to post-modernism, to the extent that Marysia Zalewski in 1996 lamented that "all these theories yet the bodies keep piling up."¹⁹ While it could be argued that the poverty of IR theory was lamented by Martin Wight as early as 1966 with his "Why there is no international theory?" and attributing the poverty of progress to the international system's anarchical nature,²⁰ more importantly, IR theory as a field has tended to analyse and codify IR practice as a post hoc endeavour.

Or perhaps an extension of Kishore's logic could lead to the radical renaming of IR as Global Studies, since the 'one-ness' of the globe is an ontological fact (is and always has been),²¹ and the current Westphalian system of nation-states was an artificial construct used by the Western victors of the Second World War to regulate order, peace and security. Circumstances have changed and Westphalian system may increasingly become irrelevant.²² The irony is that such thoughts of 'one-ness' appear to be more prevalent in practitioner-based writings a la Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.²³ This disturbingly questions the relevance and effectiveness of IR academia in deeply understanding the complex and changing reality of IR, in order to explain for knowledge's

sake and to prevent history from repeating itself. Hence, Kishore's comment that "we need a theory of one world because so far global theory has not kept up with global practice,"²⁴ is a timely warning to IR theorists to get their house in order and attempt to contribute to the real world of IR "beyond their ivory tower."²⁵ This is good advice from a practitioner-turned-theorist – Kishore Mahbubani. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 14-26.
2. *Ibid.*, 28.
3. *Ibid.*, 33-47.
4. *Ibid.*, 44-47.
5. *Ibid.*, 55-88.
6. Mr Lee Kuan Yew has been described as a 'pragmatic idealist' by his former Principal Private Secretary (PPS) Heng Swee Keat. 'Mr Lee embraces Confucianism because of its belief in the perfectibility of man. No society is perfect either, but a society with a sense of togetherness can draw out the best of our human spirit and create a better future for our people.' See Speech by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister For Education, at "The Big Ideas of Mr Lee Kuan Yew" Conference, on Monday, 16 September 2013, at 1.10pm, at The Shangri-La Hotel Singapore. Accessed from: <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2013/09/16/speech-by-mr-heng-swee-keat-at-the-big-ideas-of-mr-lee-kuan-yew-conference.php>. Accessed on 1 Oct 2p.013.
7. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 143.
8. Whether there is a Singapore-style pragmatism per se is debatable, but a study into the way pragmatism has panned out in Singapore, China (former President Deng Xiaoping's dictum, 'I don't care if it is a white cat or black cat, a cat that can catch mice is a good cat') and US (supposedly the birthplace of Philosophical Pragmatism with John Dewey, Charles Peirce and William James as key founders) is in order. Whether Singapore's pragmatism is a non-ideology (Chan, 1976) or ideology of pragmatism remains a moot point (Tan, 2012; Hill & Lian, 1995; Chua, 1997). See Chan Heng Chee, *Dynamics of One Party Dominance* (Singapore: Singapore University Press), 1976. As cited in Chee Kiong Tong, 'Materialism, Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Happiness in Singapore', in Kenji Kosaka & Masahiro Ogino (Eds.), *A Quest for Alternative Sociology* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press), 2008, 188. See also Kenneth Paul Tan, 'The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-Liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42, n. 1 (2012), 67-92 Michael Hill & Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), 188-219 Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1997).
9. Simon S. C. Tay, *Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post-Crisis Divide From America*, (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), xiii.
10. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 145-193.
11. IPM is a growth area in Public Administration and Management (PAM) theory. It theorises the international aspects of PAM: the international bureaucracy; structures and processes of international governmental organisations (IGOs); transfer of PAM thought across countries and cross-learning; forced 'internationalisation' of Western-centric PAM thought in practice in non-western countries through IGOs such as World Bank, IMF and UNDP. See David Mathiasen, 'International Public Management' in Ewan Ferlie, Laurence E. Lynn Jr & Christopher Pollitt (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Management*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 643-670. See also Martin Minogue, 'The Internationalisation of New Public Management', in Willy McCourt & Martin Minogue, *The Internationalisation of Public Management* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001), 1-19.
12. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 239-46.
13. *Ibid.*, 252-3.
14. *Ibid.*, 254-9.

15. Neo Boon Siong & Geraldine Chen, *Dynamic Governance: Embedding Culture, Capabilities and Change in Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2007), 156-176.
16. CPT Phua Chao Rong, Charles, "Book Review: The New Asian Hemisphere: Pragmatic Singaporean, Pragmatic Future World Order," *POINTER* 34, n.3 (2008). Accessed from: http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/publications/pointer/journals/2008/v34n3/book_review.html. Accessed on 1 Oct 2013.
17. William R. Shadish, Thomas D. Cook & Donald T. Campbell, *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalised Causal Inference*, (MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 1-102.
18. Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University. <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/>
19. Marysia Zalewski, "All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up: theory, theorists, theorising," in Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski, (Eds.) *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp 340-353.
20. Martin Wight, "Why is there no International Theory," in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, (Eds.) *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the theory of International Politics*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 15-35.
21. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 13-4.
22. Ibid., 3.
23. Bill Clinton, *Giving: How Each of Us can Change the World*, (New York: Alfred & Knopf, 2007). Al Gore, *The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change*, (New York: Random House, 2013). Tony Blair, *A Global Alliance for Global Values*, (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2006). Gordon Brown, *Beyond the Crash: Overcoming Crisis Globalisation*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).
24. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 51.
25. Joseph Leopold & Miroslav Nincinc, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and the Issue of Policy Relevance*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).