Review – Living the Asian Century

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/02/09/review-living-the-asian-century/

PETER COCLANIS, FEB 9 2025

Living the Asian Century: An Undiplomatic Memoir
By Kishore Mahbubani
PublicAffairs, 2024.

The Melian Dialogue is one of the most famous sections of Thucydides' foundational work, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, and no part of that section is more widely known than the passage wherein "the Athenians" remind the Melians that "practical people" know that "the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" (Thucydides 1954, 402). Thucydides is, of course, often considered the father—or, more accurately, the great, great grandfather—of the realist tradition in international relations, which long proceeded under the assumption that in international disputes and/or negotiations of one sort or another, small countries, disadvantaged as they are by power and size asymmetries, perforce "accept what they have to accept."

In recent decades this assumption has been challenged in a number of ways (Welch 2003; Harloe and Morley 2012). As part of the critique, many scholars have pointed to a number of smaller countries whose relative lack of size and power have not always led *ipso facto* to losses in the international arena (Long 2017; Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017; Werker and Novosad 2019; Wijaya, Liao, Baik, and Katada 2024). In this regard, Israel, Qatar, Switzerland, New Zealand, and the Nordic countries are often cited as examples of smaller nation-states that for one or another reason have proven influential in international affairs.

Singapore is another example, this time of a *city-state* that has more than held its own internationally. To be sure, Singapore, though tiny in area and in population, is very strong economically. Moreover, its strategic location in the midst of one of the world's most important trade routes and the rivalry between China and the West, which both court Singapore, have enhanced Singapore's international influence and improved its bargaining power. These factors certainly help to explain Singapore's successes in the international arena. But so too have the often shrewd, intricate, and highly calibrated foreign-policy initiatives advanced by the Singapore government over time, which initiatives have been effectively articulated and sometimes partially developed by a cadre of talented top-level diplomats, who generally cycle through various positions in the foreign service. Deeply attached, as it is, to the realist tradition in foreign affairs, the small city-state of Singapore clearly doesn't take any chances in its high-level foreign service appointments.

The memoir of one of the most prominent members of Singapore's cadre of top talent in foreign affairs, Kishore Mahbubani, is the subject of this essay. While his memoir is worth reading for many reasons, its intimations regarding the hidden costs of non-meritocratic ways of filling top diplomatic slots –the "donor-to-ambassador" pipeline in the U.S., for example– and, conversely, the symbolic and substantive importance of filling top-level diplomatic positions in a meritocratic way as does Singapore are among the most important (CLC 2023). A deep dive into Mahbubani's career trajectory, detailed in full in his memoir, illustrates this point.

Mahbubani, now 75 years old, has long been a well-known figure both in Asia and the West. Over the course of his career, he served with distinction for 33 years in the Singapore Foreign Service–often at the highest levels–before moving into the academic world in 2004, where he would spend the next fifteen years. His achievements in both of

these worlds were noteworthy and certainly sufficient to make his name recognizable, but it was mainly through his writings and his prominence as a public intellectual beginning in the late 1990s that his global fame is owed. Indeed, over the years he has been included on various lists of the world's top public intellectuals, mainly for works exploring the rise of Asia, and for his sometimes -controversial commentary regarding Asian values, China's ascent, and the relative decline of the West. Sometimes viewed by his detractors as either a cheerleader for Asia and Asian values or as a scold, remonstrating against the West, Mahbubani is considerably more nuanced and sophisticated as a thinker than such characterizations suggest.

In retrospect, Mahbubani's career path, let alone his many successes and global renown, seems unlikely, even implausible. Here, credit is due not only to his talent and drive, but also to Singapore's political order and more broadly to the city-state's ethos and operating system, wherein merit and meritocratic principles can often trump inherited status and wealth. Kishore Mahbubani was born in Singapore in October 1948 to a Hindu, Sindhi-speaking family that had recently relocated to Singapore after being displaced from the province of Sindh in what is now Pakistan during the so-called Partition Crisis. Mahbubani and his three sisters grew up poor in a small terrace house in the eastern part of Singapore. Indeed, while a student in Primary I, Kishore was placed in a special government feeding program for underweight, undernourished children. The family's impoverished circumstances were due mostly to the fact that Kishore's debt-ridden father, Mohandas Mahbubani—a man who drank heavily, gambled whenever he had money, and was prone to violent outbursts—was unable to maintain steady work. In 1962, when Kishore was fourteen, Mohandas Mahbubani was sentenced to nine months in prison for breach of trust, after gambling away money he had collected and then stolen from his employer at the time. While Mohandas was in prison, Kishore's mother, Janki Mahbubani, legally separated from her husband, which ushered in a period of greater stability for Kishore and his three sisters, albeit without alleviating the family's poverty.

In *Living the Asian Century,* Mahbubani takes great pains to credit his mother both for maintaining household stability during tough times and for providing the security and emotional support necessary for him to come out of childhood and adolescence relatively unscathed. Kishore was a very good student who excelled in the primary and secondary schools he attended, but, after finishing his pre-university education in 1967, his family's financial circumstances led him not immediately to university but, like many Sindhi boys in Singapore, into the textiles industry, wherein he began working as a fabric salesman for a Sindhi firm. Not long thereafter, luck or fate intervened, and Mahbubani was awarded a government scholarship to attend the University of Singapore (now the National University of Singapore), despite the fact that he had not applied for the scholarship or even for admission into the school. However, because the money he would receive from the scholarship exceeded his salary as a fabric salesman, he enrolled at the university, where he again excelled, receiving a B.A. in Philosophy in 1971 with first-class honours.

The government scholarship that had enabled Mahbubani to attend the University of Singapore required holders to work for the Singapore government for five years after graduation. While a university student, Mahbubani had served as editor of the student newspaper, for which he had sometimes written pieces critical of positions taken by the ruling party in Singapore, the People's Action Party (PAP), the governing party in Singapore from the time of independence to the present day. Despite its reputation for limiting dissent, the PAP had a policy at the time of inviting talented young dissenters to join the government, individuals such as Tommy Koh and Chan Heng Chee, for example, who later, along with Mahbubani, were to become stalwarts in the Singapore Foreign Service.

At this remove, it is difficult to say precisely why the government adopted the policy—perhaps it reflected a variant of Lyndon Baines Johnson's reasoning about it being better to have enemies inside the tent pissing out, than outside pissing in—but in hindsight it was often effective. In any case, despite the fact that the PAP knew about Mahbubani's criticism, he was offered a position with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) after graduation, which he quickly accepted, heralding the beginning of his long, varied career in the foreign service.

In some ways, Mahbubani's path in the diplomatic world reads like a textbook example of the life of a diplomat: Multiple postings in different roles in a variety of settings for relatively short periods of time. In his case, after a bit of rudimentary training and short-term stints in Australia, Germany, and Singapore, in June 1973 Mahbubani was named charge d'affaires of the Singapore Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, quite a coup for such a young officer (Mahbubani was only 24 at the time of his appointment to this position). He spent a year in Phnom Penh during the

harrowing latter stages of the Vietnamese War, after which he received a (well-earned and much needed) year-long leave from the Ministry in order to pursue an M.A. degree in Philosophy at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, Canada, which degree he was awarded in 1976.

After returning to active duty at the MFA, he assumed a high-level post in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for three years (1976-1979)–a delicate assignment because of the prickly relationship between Singapore and Malaysia ever since their ill-fated union in the short-lived Federation of Malaysia between 1963 and 1965–before returning to the home office in Singapore for another three years. He then took on a high-visibility posting in Washington, D.C., where he served as deputy chief of mission between 1982 and 1984.

While in D.C., he helped to represent Singapore in Washington, and participated in various high-level meetings with the U.S. government, including one in January 1982 in which President Reagan hosted Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, then visiting D.C., and another in which Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Keng Swee, and Koh Beng Seng, the managing director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, met with Paul Volcker, chair of the Federal Reserve Bank. He also found time to write a piece for *Foreign Affairs* on how the international community might—and should—encourage Vietnam to quit Cambodia, thereby enhancing security for all on the mainland of Southeast Asia. The piece, which appeared in December 1983, was the first by a Singaporean ever to appear in that journal.

Mahbubani had been tapped for the high-level post in D.C. at a young age in part because the Singapore government at the time bought into a corporate concept called "current estimated potential" which it had learned from the Shell Oil Company, which long had had a major presence in Singapore. Adherence to the same concept—buttressed by Mahbubani's performance in D.C.—got him his next posting, one which constituted a major promotion, in August 1984: An assignment at the age of 35 to serve as Singapore's Permanent Representative (Ambassador) to the United Nations, where he would be succeeding another impressive veteran Singaporean foreign service officer, Tommy Koh, who had been named Ambassador to the U.S.

Mahbubani served as Singapore's Ambassador to the UN until January 1989, working assiduously to promote Singapore's interests, first and foremost—all high-level Singaporean diplomats are realists in foreign policy terms. Because Mahbubani, by his own admission, also had "idealist tendencies" (p.294), he was also comfortable promoting, when practicable, the interests of others as well, Southeast Asia and developing countries in Africa, most notably. At the same time, while in New York he championed the United Nations *qua* institution, for the organization represented, indeed, epitomized the rules-based international order that helped to protect smaller countries such as Singapore from being bullied by the major powers of the world. That said, Singapore—being Singapore—was always cognizant of power asymmetries/realities in the world, so while at the UN Mahbubani worked carefully and consistently to help keep Singapore's relations with the U.S, the world's strongest power and a key ally, on a solid footing.

By all accounts, Mahbubani's tenure at the UN was successful, but for reasons left somewhat vague in Mahbubani's memoir, he was passed over for a senior position in the PAP cabinet—likely Minister of Foreign Affairs–in the late 1980s. When he returned to Singapore in 1989, he was instead appointed deputy secretary at the MFA, which in his view "was clearly not a promotion" (p.191). Mahbubani suggests that this bump in the road in a career that had hitherto sped along unimpeded may have been due to a feeling that he was arrogant or unpopular with colleagues, or perhaps because he had made the wrong enemies at the foreign service along the way. Bureaucratic politics ain't beanbag, as it were, so any or all of these factors may have been involved. Whatever the case, at the time Mahbubani felt that by 1989—at the age of 40—his career may have already peaked.

Here, he was wrong–indeed, quite wrong. After two years as deputy secretary at MFA, he secured a leave of absence to enroll in a program at Harvard for mid-career diplomats, run out of the school's Center for International Affairs. His stint at Harvard in 1991-1992 proved a mixed bag, but, while at the center he made useful contacts, joined new intellectual networks, read extensively, and wrote papers that were subsequently published in*Foreign Policy*, the *National Interest*, and *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

Mahbubani's academic writings at Harvard served him well, and when he returned to Singapore he was increasingly viewed in governmental circles as an "academic" civil servant. So viewed, in 1992 he was offered an appointment as founding director of Singapore's newly established Civil Service College, the aim of which was to train and raise the standards of public officials of all types in Singapore. After initial hesitation, he accepted the posting and got the college off the ground, before accepting a post in October 1993 that he long had sought but feared he had missed out on: Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The person holding this position serves under the Minister of Foreign Affairs and is the top official in the MFA's headquarters in Singapore. Mahbubani served with distinction in this role from 1993 to 1998, when he was again tapped to serve as Singapore's Permanent Representative (Ambassador) to the United Nations.

Mahbubani's second tour of duty at the UN spanned the crowded years between 1998 to 2004, which, of course, meant dealing in one way or another with aftershocks arising from or at least associated with 9-11 and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. During part of this period, Singapore was a (non-permanent) member of the UN Security Council, and Mahbubani had the responsibility of serving as the President of the Council in January 2001 and again in May 2002, during which fraught times international tensions were high. Despite internal sniping among members and fierce, if often exaggerated criticism from outside, the UN carried on, generally playing as useful a role as circumstances—and the permanent members of the Security Council—allowed.

In 2003, with his tenure at the UN winding down, Mahbubani began to ponder his future in the diplomatic world. He had held almost every important position in the foreign service, but he was still but 54 years old. While pondering the possibility of joining the think tank world in the U.S., a totally unexpected opportunity opened up for this "academic" civil servant: the founding deanship of a new school being established in Singapore: The Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. When offered this position, Mahbubani jumped on it, holding it from 2004 until December 2017 when he stepped down, while remaining a Professor of the Practice at the school until he "retired" in 2019.

During his thirteen-year tenure as Dean, the LFK School became recognized as perhaps the finest school of its type in Asia and one of the leading public policy schools in the world, status due in no small part to Mahbubani's vision and success at raising money: by the time he stepped down as Dean, the young school's endowment had already grown to over $500 million (Singapore dollars). This is not to say that Mahbubani's years as Dean were without controversy—one involving a faculty member who was found to be spying for China, and another relating to a foreign-policy spat between Mahbubani and other senior officials in Singapore, including another talented member of the foreign service, Ambassador at Large Bilihari Kausikan, come immediately to mind in this regard. Nonetheless, Mahbubani's contributions to the early development—and success—of the LKY School are hard to overestimate.

Since his departure from the LKY School, Mahbubani has shifted gears a bit, but hardly slowed down (despite double bypass heart surgery in 2016). As soon as he stepped away from the LKY School, he became a Distinguished Fellow at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute (ARI), and he remains active even today, leading ARI initiatives, writing, and serving on various committees and boards in Singapore. His many accomplishments over the course of his long careers in diplomacy and academia have earned him numerous honors, including election into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2019.

All of the above matters—and more–are covered in *Living the Asian Century*, Mahbubani's consistently interesting memoir. In the work one gets inside views of policy formulation, including disagreements among top political elites, as well as candid assessments of a number of Singapore's "Founding Fathers"–Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and S. Rajaratnam, most notably—with each of whom Mahbubani worked. The sections relating to the "economic architect" of modern Singapore, Goh Keng Swee, whom Mahbubani knew quite well, are particularly rich.

Glimpses of Mahbubani's personal life are also captured in the memoir: The sections on his family's struggles when he was young and, later, on the breakdown of his first marriage are especially vivid. What one doesn't get much of in the memoir are deep insights into Mahbubani's political and economic positions nor detailed discussions of any of his nine other books. Clearly, the memoir was not intended as an intellectual autobiography, but as a personal life history—at once a *bildungsroman* and a motivational tale—intended to instruct and demonstrate to younger Asians

just what has become possible in Asia with its ascent over the past seventy-five years or so, the span of time corresponding with Mahbubani's life. Mahbubani, after all, grew up in an impoverished immigrant family, the head of which was often drunken and in debt and for a time imprisoned. Moreover, he was from Sindhi background in Chinese-majority Singapore. Yet because of talent, luck, and pluck he was able to flourish in meritocratic Singapore. His overarching message to (younger) readers is that if he could, so can they. This is not to say that there is no ego involved in the memoir—there always is—but the book is intended in large part to show how one man's life interacted with dynamic "times" in modern-day Asia. One other point should be mentioned here, though, this one regarding the subtitle of Mahbubani's book: "An Undiplomatic Memoir." To this reader at least, the subtitle is in some ways a misnomer, for the author is generally discreet, settles few scores, and takes the high road throughout, qualities rather more diplomatic than not.

Readers interested primarily in Mahbubani's core beliefs, his positions on Asia *vis à vis* the West, the role of values and culture in Asia's rise and the West's relative decline, the causes of the rise of China, etc., must look instead to other writings by Mahbubani, particularly to his provocatively titled books *Can Asians Think? Understanding the Divide Between East and West*; *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*; *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World; Has the West Lost It? A Provocation*; and *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy.* Readers who do so should keep in mind that notwithstanding the often-inflammatory titles of his books, Mahbubani is not the knee-jerk West basher he is sometimes assumed to be.

Rather, he should properly be seen as someone who is steeped in the West, its history, and culture—his concentrations in school were in Western philosophy and political philosophy, after all—and deeply respectful of the West. He has been married twice and each time he married an American woman; his children live in the U.S. He should be seen instead as a concerned, well-disposed critic of some of the ways in which the West has developed—or, perhaps more accurately regressed–in recent decades, pointing in particular to a variety of troubling economic, political, cultural, and institutional phenomena that have at once set back the West and helped to facilitate Asia's ascent. But for details on these matters, one must go not to *Living the Asian Century*, but to Mahbubani's other works.

At the end of the day, what are the principal takeaways from this lengthy, in-depth examination of *Living the Asian Century* and the life and career of its author? One, clearly, is to convey to readers some sense of the ways in which meritocratic Singapore brings talented individuals such as Mahbubani into government service, cultivates their talents, cycles them through various positions as needed, rewards them, and retains them for long periods of time. A second is to suggest that this approach has at once proven beneficial both to Mahbubani and to the performance of Singapore's foreign service over time, in so doing, helping Singapore to punch above its weight in matters international and gain widespread respect in IR circles. To be sure, Singapore's wealth, geographical setting, and geopolitical importance also explain much, but having a talented cadre of intellectually inclined, experienced, well-respected diplomats in prominent positions—people such as Mahbubani, Tommy Koh, Chan Heng Chee, among others—rather than well-heeled donors, celebrity has-beens, and mediocre political cronies to whom favors are owed, matters too, which further complicates the message of the Melian Dialogue, with which dialogue we began.

References

CLC (Campaign Legal Center). 2023. *The Donor-To-Ambassador Pipeline: Why America's Key Diplomats Are Often Wealthy Political Donors*. Washington, D.C.: Campaign Legal Center.

Harloe, Katherine and Neville Morley, eds. 2012. *Thucydides and the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Long, Tom. 2017. "It's Not the Size, It's the Relationship: From 'Small States' to Asymmetry." *International Politics* 54 (2):144-160 [DOI:10.1057/s41311-017-0028-x].

Thorhallsson Baldur and Sverrir Steinsson. 2017. "Small State Foreign Policy." *Politics*, Oxford Research Encyclopedias [https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.484].

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*. 1954. Rex Warner, trans. New York: Penguin Books.

Welch, David A. 2003. "Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides." *Review of International Studies* 29 (3): 301-319 [DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210503003012].

Werker, Eric and Paul Novosad. 2019. "Who Runs the International System? Nationality and Leadership in the United Nations Secretariat." 2019. *Review of International Organizations* 14 (March): 1-33 [https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11558-017-9294-z].

Wijaya, Trissia, Jessica C. Liao, Ewon Baik, and Saori N. Katada. 2024. "Pivotal Power of Small States to Save the Liberal Economic Order: The Case from East Asia." *The Pacific Review,* published online 28 June 2024 (forthcoming in print) [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epub/10.1080/09512748.2024.2369700?needAccess=true

---

About the author:

Peter A. Coclanis is Albert R. Newsome Distinguished Professor of History and Director of the Global Research Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (U.S.). He works mainly in the fields of U.S., Southeast Asian, and global economic and business history. Over the years he has published widely, including in*E-International relations*.