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Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

The Convergence of Civilizations

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14 March 2013

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Michael Williams:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to Chatham House. It's a real privilege today to have an old friend and colleague speaking here: Kishore Mahbubani, distinguished diplomat and academician. For more than 30 years he worked in the Singaporean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, latterly as permanent secretary and also as permanent representative of Singapore at the United Nations in New York. Since he retired from the foreign ministry, I think more than a decade ago, he has reinvented himself as a public intellectual – as a global intellectual, perhaps even.

Global Convergence: Asia, the West and the Logic of One World... we look forward to your remarks.

Kishore Mahbubani:

Thank you, Michael, for this welcome. I am so delighted to be here in Chatham House. I think it's the first time I'm speaking here, and I'm so glad I'm speaking on the record and not off the record. I'm also glad my old friends – it's good to see so many old friends here. I hope you will protect me if I say something deliberately, terribly wrong this afternoon.

When you give a talk, the hardest part is actually deciding how to start. In America, you begin with a joke. In Asia, you begin with an apology. So sometimes what I do is I combine the traditions and I apologize for the bad joke.

The bad joke – actually I hope it's not that bad – was told by Singapore's first chief minister. David Marshall was his name, an Iraqi Jew – a brilliant man, brilliant lawyer. He told the story about a young priest who was actually very devout and wanted to pray all the time, but also had an addiction to smoking. One day he went to see the bishop and he said, 'Your Grace, please, may I have your permission to smoke while I pray?'

The bishop threw him out and said, 'Out of the question! This is sacrilegious. Priests pray and don't smoke.'

So he went out and met a fellow priest; he looked very dejected so the fellow priest said, 'What happened?' He explained what happened. The fellow priest said, 'No, there's been a misunderstanding here, let's go back.' So they went back to the bishop and the fellow priest said, 'Your Grace, there's been a terrible misunderstanding here. All that this man is asking for is permission to pray while he smokes.'

So the bishop said, 'How can you deny a man permission to pray?'

I begin with that story because it describes so well how you can have exactly the same event and two completely different narratives. That, in a sense, to summarize my remarks, is the state of our world today: you have one set of facts but two narratives. Of course the dominant narrative is the Western narrative, but the Western narrative at the end of the day still represents the views of only 12 per cent of the world's population, who live in the West. And then there's a narrative of the 'rest', who make up 88 per cent of the world's population. In a sense this book, *Great Convergence* – which I'm happy to announce is on sale over there – tries to capture the world as seen from the eyes of the rest.

What's remarkable is that if you look at the history of the world, especially the past few decades, it was the West that was the custodian of optimism in the world and the rest was far less optimistic – in many places very pessimistic. Now, in a rather dramatic reversal that we have in the world today, the West is almost becoming a custodian of pessimism while the rest of the world is becoming more and more optimistic. So I try to explain why the rest of the world is becoming more and more optimistic.

To explain it, I say that there has been essentially what I call a 'great convergence', but a great convergence on at least three fronts. I'll try to spend a bit of time on each front and finish at 1:30, so we can have more questions and answers this afternoon.

The first area of convergence is the one that we least anticipated in some ways. This, of course, is the convergence between the South and the North. Having served as ambassador to the UN – Michael has been there too – I can tell you that when I was at the UN, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, there was almost a sense of despair that the South would ever make it and be as successful as the North. Today, what seemed impossible is happening on so many fronts.

I'll give you three examples of how the South is becoming like the North. Firstly, if you look in the area of global poverty; as you know we've been battling global poverty for decades. When the UN had its famous Millennium Summit in 2000 – I was there as ambassador to the UN – the UN established something called the Millennium Development Goals – MDGs. Most of these MDGs will not be met, but one MDG will be met and it will be exceeded by 2015. What's that MDG? It's the halving of global poverty by 2015. We are doing some amazing stuff in that area, so much so that the National Intelligence Council of the United States of America, which by any standards

is a relatively conservative body, has predicted that global poverty will be totally eliminated from the world by 2030. If this is not the great convergence, what is?

I can tell you, when I first started this book tour – this is my eighth stop in three weeks – several weeks ago when I landed in Washington DC, on one Sunday, I turned on the television set. It was CNN; Fareed Zakaria was on, *GPS*. His guest was Bill Gates. So he asked Bill Gates, ‘How do you feel about the world?’

I was delighted with Bill Gates’ answer: he said, ‘I’m feeling very optimistic’. So Fareed asked Bill Gates, ‘Why? Why are you so optimistic?’ He said, ‘It’s very simple. In the work that I am doing’ – and you know he’s going out there in the Third World, trying to help poor people, save babies – he says he’s making amazing progress in reducing infant mortality. In 1990, 20 million babies were dying a year; in 2000, 12 million; today, 5 million. He says it’s going down rapidly. I can tell you, when you watch this figure, this figure is a leading indicator of our global condition, because babies at the end of the day are the most vulnerable citizens in a society. So when they start dying, you know the ecosystem around them is not functioning; when they start living, the ecosystem around them is protecting them.

So globally, less and less babies are dying because the ecosystem is improving all over the world and things are getting better. That too is part of the great convergence.

On another front, moving from poverty to the middle classes, we are seeing something absolutely remarkable happening in our times. As you know, traditionally the middle classes – except maybe in the West – make up a very small part of the global population, but we are seeing a dramatic increase in the number of people moving into the middle classes all over the world. To give you just one statistic – and if you have to leave this entire talk with just one statistic, please remember this one statistic – today in all of Asia, which has roughly about 3.5 billion people, the number of people who enjoy middle-class living standards is roughly about 500 million. But by 2020, which is only seven years from now, that number is going to explode from 500 million to 1.75 billion, an increase of three-and-a-half times in seven years. This means the new Asian middle classes will be one-and-a-half times the total population of the West. The world has seen nothing like this before.

This is, by the way, part of the great global convergence, as you were saying earlier, because globally the figures are going to go up from 1.8 billion today to 3.2 billion by 2020, and 4.9 billion by 2030, which means more than half the

world's population by then will enjoy middle-class living standards. This is an amazing transformation in human history that is happening with what I call this convergence across the South–North divide.

The other significant area, the third example, comes from a slightly different area: the area of war and peace. Here, as you know, the greatest achievement of the European Union is not really its economic integration – which is of course a good thing – but the greatest thing that the European Union has achieved is that you don't just have zero wars between any two European Union member states, you have zero prospect of war. No matter how badly the UK and France or the UK and Germany may argue, the prospects of them going to war today are zero. That's an amazing achievement.

In many parts of Asia, I can tell you we have not clearly achieved zero prospect of war. But we have achieved zero wars, and that's a big leap forward for a region that has seen the biggest wars. Globally, interstate wars have become a sunset industry. In fact, if you look at the statistics, ever since statistics were kept on the number of people dying in interstate wars, around 1950 it was about half a million people a year – now it's down to 30,000 a year and it's rapidly declining. By the way, there's a book by a Harvard professor, Steven Pinker, called *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which gives you lots of detail and explains why this is happening and also documenting essentially that violence is diminishing in human society.

So this again is part of the great convergence. So you can see what we perceive in the world of the South, the region we thought was just full of poverty and wars is now transforming itself dramatically. So that's one dimension of the great convergence between the North and the South.

The second dimension of the great convergence is between East and West. Here I am not talking about the old East and West – the Soviet Union and the West – this is the new East and West, which is the West and all of Asia. I chose that line of division because Samuel Huntington in his famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, which as you know was a bestseller in its time, predicted that in the future we would see a clash of civilizations, especially a clash between the West and China, and the West and the Islamic world. The good news is that it's not going to happen. In many ways, across those civilizational divides, they are becoming less and less important.

Amazingly enough, this is much more true within the West and China, because even though in theory China's political system hasn't changed – it was run by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 and run by the Chinese

Communist Party in 1979, when Deng Xiaoping came along, and still run by the Chinese Communist Party. You think, oh, nothing has changed in China.

But actually everything has changed in China, even though the Communist Party is still running it. In 1979, when Deng Xiaoping took over and launched his Four Modernizations, at that point the Chinese citizen could not choose where to live, where to work, where to study, where to travel, what to wear – no choices. When I went to China in 1980, everyone had Maoist suits on and there were no skyscrapers, no neon signs. China was a completely controlled society.

Today you go to China – if you go to Beijing, if you go to Shanghai, and you walk on the streets, you don't feel like you're in a different civilization. In fact, it seems more like London or Paris when you're walking down the streets. The Chinese people today can choose where to live, where to work, where to study, what to wear. Amazingly, each year 70 million Chinese leave China freely, and each year 70 million Chinese return to China freely. So clearly in the area of personal freedoms, Chinese society has opened up dramatically. So the gap that was supposed to be between the West and China has clearly been reduced.

I can tell you that – to make a slightly provocative point here – in theory, of course, the West is closer to Russia. Russia is a democratic society, a member of the Council of Europe and so part of all the same Western fabric. But actually if you look at the societies, in Chinese society, in many ways the people seem to appreciate much more what the West has done than the Russians do. This is a rather peculiar thing that's happened. So the society gap is actually less between China and the West than Russia and the West. That's an indication of how the clash of civilizations will not come. That's also part of the great convergence.

The harder part to talk about is of course the gap between the West and the Islamic world, because there, there is clearly a gap. There is a lot of misunderstanding. But I actually believe that even there, things are getting better and better. The problem you have is that if you read the Western media, you only get the bad news coming out of the Islamic world. You never get the good news. And yet, there is so much good news out there in that world also.

For example, you pick up the newspapers; there is a lot of focus on North Africa – the problems of Egypt or Libya or Tunisia and so on. Yet if you add up the total population of North Africa, it is less than the population of Indonesia, which is 250–260 million. This country, Indonesia – and I can tell

you, if you go back and read the newspapers of 1997–98, they had been confidently predicting that Indonesia will be the new Yugoslavia; that Indonesia – the most diverse nation in the region – would fall apart, break apart, because of the economic crisis. It could never hang together. Lo and behold, Indonesia has a very successful, peaceful transition to democracy, a remarkably successful democratic revolution. It is hanging together very nicely and growing at six per cent per year comfortably. So there is a lot of good news that doesn't get reported out there.

If you go to many of these places and you talk to the young people and ask them what they aspire they have, the things they aspire to have – the kind of middle-class life they aspire to have – are no different from what many in the West aspire to. That too is part of the great convergence that is happening. So the world, amazingly enough, is becoming a better and better place.

Before I go to my third convergence, let me also emphasize, as someone who worked for 33 years in the Singapore foreign service – and Singapore, as you all know, is one of the most hard-headed, tough-minded, realistic governments in the world. So I'm not a woolly-headed idealist, I'm aware of all the problems that exist in the world. There are three full chapters in the book devoted to every single major geopolitical challenge in the world and why we have to handle each one, and what the solutions are. So there are lots of problems out there but I think we have to recognize that for all these problems, several positive trends are happening in the world.

All this brings me to my third and most important convergence, which is the dramatic transformation of our world in another dimension. To explain this dramatic transformation, I use a very simple metaphor of the boat. What is this boat metaphor? I say that in the past, when 7 billion people lived in 193 separate countries, it was as though they were living in 193 separate boats, with captains and crews to take care of each boat and rules to make sure that the boats didn't collide. That, I would say, is a reasonably accurate description of the 1945 rules-based order that was created at the end of World War II. But today the 7 billion people in the world – and sometimes I say both metaphorically and literally – no longer live in 193 separate boats. They live in 193 separate cabins on the same boat. Our only problem with this boat is that you have captains and crews taking care of each cabin and no captain or crew taking care of the boat as a whole. That's a fundamental challenge that the world faces.

If you want proof that we are on the same boat, look at all the major global challenges we are trying to overcome. Look at what happened in the 2008–09

financial crisis. You saw at the height of the crisis something quite remarkable happen: that George W Bush, who by any definition is one of the most unilateralist American presidents of recent times, was the one who asked for the convening of the first G20 leaders meeting. So even George W Bush realized that sitting in his cabin on the boat, he couldn't fix the global economy, and that's why he convened the first G20 leaders meeting. It was the subsequent meeting in London here, chaired by Gordon Brown, that eventually saved the global economy, when all the world leaders came out of their cabins to launch a global stimulus package, and that saved the global economy.

The problem with that G20 exercise is that it worked very well when there was a crisis but once the crisis ended all the subsequent G20 leaders meetings failed, because the leaders went back into their cabins and didn't worry about the boat again. That's why the world is in trouble.

A second example of a global challenge that brings us all together is the challenge of global warming. Here, it should be fairly obvious to all of us that no one country can solve this problem of global warming. Even if the United States and the EU miraculously stopped all their greenhouse gas emissions and went down to zero, China and India and the rest of the world would keep growing and greenhouse gas emissions would continue. So if you want to find a solution, we all have to come out of our cabins and work together on the bridge of the boat to find a solution to global warming.

The one point I make about global warming, which I think was initially made by the former president of Costa Rica, José María Figueres – he said, 'Please remember that if you fail to meet this challenge, we don't have plan B, because we don't have a planet B. We only have planet A.' It's actually quite striking, at a time when the consensus, at least among the scientific community, is that this challenge is real, how little is being done on the part of world leaders to find a real solution to this. This is another reason why I wrote *The Great Convergence* now, to remind us that we actually have to come together to handle these sorts of challenges.

Unfortunately, what's holding us back – and here I'm going to end with a slightly provocative point, to show Michael I haven't changed that much – is that one of the dirty little secrets that I expose in the book is that it has been a Western policy to weaken multilateral institutions over the past few decades. It may have made strategic sense 20 or 30 years ago – although in my book I argue it was never in the Western interest to do that – but it certainly makes

no sense for the West to continue weakening multilateral institutions when you are clearly a minority in the global village.

Speaking as someone – an ethnic Sindhi Indian living as a minority in Chinese-majority Singapore – I know the only thing that protects minorities is to have a rules-based order. So it is clearly in Western interests today to promote a greater rules-based order and to work for the strengthening of global multilateral institutions. But the West, because of its old mindset, is continuing on strategic autopilot and continuing to weaken all these institutions, like the United Nations and others.

What is actually quite frightening is that I always assumed, as a young foreign service officer in Singapore, that the best strategic thinking must obviously come from Western capitals, because they have the best minds in government and the best capacity to forecast long-term trends and the best ability to work out the best long-term strategic policies. Therefore one of the biggest shocks of our time is how the West continues on autopilot on a course which I think will destroy long-term Western strategic interests.

To illustrate that with a concrete example, let me pick an area where I hope everybody would agree we have to work together: the area of pandemics. If you live as an affluent minority in our planet, you have the most to lose if there's a major pandemic breaking out. We know how fast pandemics spread because if you look at the SARS virus, it began in a small village in China; from China it went to Hong Kong; from Hong Kong it went simultaneously to two cities on exactly opposite sides of the world, Singapore and Toronto. What's really fascinating is that Singapore and Toronto are two of the cleanest cities in the world. So it shows that if you stay in your cabin and you scrub your cabin clean, it makes no difference – the pandemic is going to hit you.

So you have a vested interest in strengthening any organization that's designed to stop pandemics, and that's of course the World Health Organization. Amazingly enough, it has been Western policy to weaken the World Health Organization. You want proof? I review a book by Kelley Lee – I think she's in London – on the WHO. She points out 20 years ago, 75 per cent of the WHO budget came from regular assessed contributions, which you can use for long-term planning and therefore recruit health inspectors and give them a lifelong career, and 25 per cent came from voluntary contributions. Today in the WHO you have almost the exact reverse: 28 per cent comes from regular assessed contributions and the rest of it comes from voluntary contributions. You cannot build a long-term, healthy organization,

like the World Health Organization, if over 70 per cent of your contributions come as voluntary contributions. That's madness. Amazingly enough, that madness is Western strategic policy.

Which is why I think it is time for the West to wake up and realize it cannot go on autopilot. It should therefore switch course and now work with the rest of the world. Thank you.