



India's Role as an Emerging Power: Q&A with Kishore Mahbubani

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What does India's rise as an emerging power mean for the United States and the world? Will India be a counterweight to China on the world stage, or will India and China find common ground despite tensions over their disputed border? Kishore Mahbubani, former ambassador of Singapore to the United Nations and author of multiple books on global geopolitics, speaks with the India Policy Initiative on India's relations with the United States, China, and the Global South. Drawing on his extensive experience at the United Nations, Mahbubani shares his insights on India's opportunities at the multilateral level. He sheds light on how recent domestic trends in India may shape India's engagement with the world and why India is likely to seek a space for itself as an independent player rather than ally with any major power.

The views and opinions expressed in this interview are those of Professor Mahbubani and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of The Carter Center.

IPI: Over the last several months, the U.S. and China have seen much confrontational rhetoric, including over tariffs, visits by U.S. leaders to Taiwan, the alleged surveillance balloon that flew over the U.S., and so on. But with the meeting that took place between President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in San Francisco on Nov. 15, 2023, the two countries are trying to lower the temperature. There was an agreement during the meeting to stop the flow of fentanyl and to resume military-level communications. What may be causing this shift, and would you expect the progress to last?

Mahbubani: The world should applaud Biden and Xi for having this meeting. It has lowered the temperature of the tense U.S.-China relationship. However, the trajectory of this relationship has remained the same. As I document in my book *Has China Won?*, the U.S. is determined to stop China from overtaking it as the No. 1 power. Despite the improvement in relations, the U.S. will carry out other measures (building on the trade tariffs and chip export restrictions) to slow down China's economic rise. Nonetheless, with the improved communications and promises of regular meetings between the U.S. and China, the prospects of a war or accidental conflict have declined. We should welcome this shift. Since Biden has emphasized that the U.S. will continue with cooperation and competition, there might be other positive results in due course. In short, we will see a very mixed picture of the U.S.-China relationship.

IPI: In recent years, the U.S.-India strategic partnership has been strengthened by a shared perception of China as a threat. In this context, some analysts in Delhi fear that an improvement in ties between the U.S. and China — or, as the Indian scholar [Raja Mohan puts it](#), “a ‘G-2’ or a Sino-American collaboration in Asia” — may diminish U.S. interest in a strategic partnership with India. Others, however, argue that



India-U.S. ties have matured far beyond the China factor — that the relationship is now resilient and robust enough to function independently of the two countries' equations with China.

If U.S.-China relations improve in 2024, how might that impact India's relations with China and the U.S., given that India has a national election in 2024?

Mahbubani: U.S.-China relations cannot improve in 2024. The year 2024 will see a presidential election in the U.S. Each candidate will vie to prove that he or she is more anti-China. Hence, India need not worry about this in 2024. Since U.S.-China relations will likely worsen before they improve, the U.S. establishment will continue to see India as a valuable geopolitical asset to counterbalance China. Hence, the vigorous courtship of India by the U.S. will continue.

IPI: The U.S.-India partnership recorded much progress through 2023: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was accorded a state visit in Washington, and President Biden traveled to New Delhi for the G-20 summit. This progress is especially true on the defense front, including the transfer of [advanced technology](#) which the U.S. only shares with its closest allies.

But some contend that much of this defense cooperation is underpinned by a key expectation in the U.S. that India can — or will — play the role of a counterweight to China. Is India likely to play this role?

Mahbubani: India is too big a country to serve as a geopolitical pawn of any great power. As [Ashley Tellis](#) has told his fellow Americans, India will not become an ally of the U.S. Instead, India will emerge as the third most important independent pole in a multipolar world.

The world will welcome India's emergence as an independent pole. Most countries worldwide, especially in the Global South, do not want to take sides in the U.S.-China contest. They would like protection from being pushed into one corner or the other. India can provide that protection. For example, India's decision not to join Western sanctions on Russia after it invaded Ukraine also provided political cover for the Global South not to impose sanctions. This explains why governments representing [85% of the world's population](#) have not imposed sanctions on Russia. India's leadership provided that opportunity. As a result, India also has a massive geopolitical opportunity to become a key independent player on the world stage.

IPI: On the flip side of this expectation that India will be a counterweight to China, there is also the idea that India and China have several areas of convergence of their own. Unlike the U.S., India and China see a multipolar world as a key strategic objective. Similarly, on trade, climate change, Ukraine, the dominance of the U.S. dollar, and some human rights issues, India and China appear to have similar stances. India has, for instance, [abstained](#) on U.N. resolutions that talk about human rights violations in Xinjiang.

Many analysts believe that the India-China border dispute [hinders](#) any meaningful strategic cooperation on these issues. Still, Kanti Bajpai, for instance, has [said](#) that if China made “something of a gesture to



India” on the border dispute, it could “flip India ... against the U.S.” How likely is such a shift in India-China ties?

Mahbubani: Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was right when he [said](#) the sky is big enough to accommodate the simultaneous growth of China and India. Indeed, the return of both China and India is perfectly natural, as I document in my book *The Asian 21st Century*. China and India were the world's two largest economies from the first century A.D. to 1820. They are more likely to grow faster if they collaborate.

Unfortunately, relations between China and India have deteriorated since the tragic clash in Galwan in June 2020. Even though tensions on the border have subsided, relations have not improved significantly. There have been no bilateral meetings between Xi and Modi since the clash, even though they have met in [multilateral settings](#). This troubles many Asian countries as most of them would like to see good relations between China and India. Kanti Bajpai is right: As the larger power (with an economy six times bigger), China can make something of a gesture to India.

Realistically, nothing will happen until after the elections in India in 2024. If Modi wins another convincing victory in 2024, as he is expected to, his new mandate could give him the political strength to forge a new relationship with China. Even though China and India will never become good friends (because of a recent history of troubled relations), they can strive to achieve a good working relationship. Most of Asia will cheer if this happens.

IPI: Another key factor that has underpinned closer ties between India and the U.S. in recent years is multilateralism. The U.S. has endorsed India’s membership in various global councils, including a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seat. This, too, appears to stem from an expectation in Washington that as democracies, India and the U.S. have shared interests on the multilateral stage of — as the [U.S. State Department puts it](#) — “upholding the rules-based international system.” But when India was elected to the UNSC in 2021-22, [many in the Global North](#) appeared to have been frustrated by India’s abstentions on resolutions supported by the North Atlantic bloc — on Ukraine, Iran, and other issues.

There are also concerns over whether India and its partners in the Global North may clash over norms and values. In recent times, India has faced some criticism over minority rights, communal violence, and democratic backsliding. Some members of the U.S. Congress spoke up about this during Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Washington in 2023. India and Canada have been engaged in a dispute over an alleged extrajudicial killing related to Sikh separatism.

You had a long career at the U.N. as Singapore’s ambassador. In that capacity, you had also closely interacted with India at the U.N. What do you think a stronger Indian voice at the U.N. might mean for the U.S. and China?

Mahbubani: India should be given a permanent seat on the UNSC immediately. It is already the fifth-largest economy in the world. Soon, it will become the third largest. The founders of the U.N. wisely decided that the great powers of the day should be given a veto as this would entrench them in their commitment to the U.N. They learnt an important lesson from the collapse of the League of Nations. When the U.S. withdrew, the



INDIA POLICY INITIATIVE

League collapsed. The veto also serves as an important safeguard. It ensures that the U.N. will not make a decision against a great power that it cannot implement. Giving a veto to a great power is therefore a win-win decision for the U.N.

However, this system only works if the veto is given to the great powers of today or tomorrow (like the U.S., China, and Russia) and not to the great powers of yesterday (like the U.K. and France). As Martin Wolf wisely [said in 2009](#), “Within a decade, a world in which the U.K. is on the United Nations Security Council and India is not will seem beyond laughable.” It will be beyond laughable. If the U.N. does not give the veto to India, it endangers itself. India is now strong enough to announce unilaterally that it will no longer abide by UNSC resolutions if it is not given a permanent seat. Hence, as I explain in my book, *The Great Convergence*, the U.N. will protect itself by getting India into the UNSC as soon as possible.

Kishore Mahbubani was with the Singapore Foreign Service for 33 years from 1971 to 2004. He had postings in Cambodia, Malaysia, Washington, and New York, where he twice was Singapore’s ambassador to the United Nations and served as president of the U.N. Security Council in January 2001 and May 2002. In 2004, Mahbubani was appointed the founding dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. In April 2019, he was elected as an honorary international member to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which has honored distinguished thinkers, including several of America’s founders, since 1780. He is presently a Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is the author of nine books: Can Asians Think?, Beyond the Age of Innocence, The New Asian Hemisphere, The Great Convergence, Can Singapore Survive, The ASEAN Miracle (co-authored with Jeffery Sng), Has the West Lost It?, Has China Won?, and The Asian 21st Century.

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