Professor Kishore Mahbubani - Lessons for the Indian Ocean from Singapore & East Asia - 29 July 2025

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Professor Mahbubani, growth figures at the start of this year from the IMF's World Economic Outlook show that the fastest-growing regions in the world for the next two years are India at 6.5%, followed by China and ASEAN at 4.6% to 4.5%, and then sub-Saharan Africa at 4.3%. So we can clearly see, as you rightly depict, that the 21st century is the Asian Century, and from the second-half of the Century, Africa presents a lot of opportunities, if able to maintain their continental free trade area.

Initially, when we thought of titling this discussion 'The Future of the Indian Ocean, you said you are not an expert on the Indian Ocean. However, to begin, can you please share some lessons for the Indian Ocean Region from the East Asian region?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani

First, let me begin by thanking you very much and thanking President Wickremesinghe for inviting me here. It's such a pleasure to be in this historic location.

You know, your question is about the Asian century, and I know there is still a lot of disbelief, especially in the West, that this is going to be the Asian Century, but unfortunately for the West, the data is undeniable, and for those who have any doubts about how big the structural shift is happening in the world, I use one statistic to explain to everyone how the world has changed fundamentally. In 1980, the combined GNP of the European Union was 10 times bigger than China. 1980 is not that far back. It's 45 years ago. Today, China and the European Union are about the same size and by 2050, the European Union will be about half the size of China. So can you imagine, in one human lifetime, the European Union goes from being 10 times bigger than China to becoming half the size of China? I think when future historians look at our time, they will be absolutely astonished at the kind of structural shifts that are taking place. And this is not just a story about China, it's about the rest of Asia, it's about India, it's about ASEAN, and of course we mustn't forget that in many ways, after Japan in some ways in some ways launched the Asian Century by becoming the first Asian country to develop, they were followed by the four Tigers South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and that inspired ASEAN to move forward and then China and then India. If you tried to follow the geography of this, remember it starts with Japan, four tigers on the rim of the Pacific, ASEAN in Southeast Asia, then it crosses to China and India, and it can keep going, the ripple effects can keep going.

So when you talk about the Indian Ocean, clearly the ripple effects from this transition of East Asia, Southeast Asia, will go into the Indian Ocean, and the development will happen. And certainly, India is in a massive take-off phase. There can be no doubt whatsoever that India is going to take off in the next 10 to 20 years, and since India, as you know, sits in the middle of the Indian Ocean, if India takes off, clearly, it will have ripple effects on the whole, on the rest of the Region, too. But one lesson I've learned in my life— now that I'm very very old— is that nothing can be taken for granted. You can never do straight line projections because there are always surprises and shocks that come along the way.

Unfortunately, quite often what happens when countries start doing well for a while, they become complacent, they become arrogant, and then they forget the discipline of success, and that happens to many countries, by the way, and so that's going to be the challenge for the Indian Ocean countries. How do you, on the one hand, take advantage of the momentum, but at the same time, never assume that you've arrived or that you've made it, because it's a constant struggle to keep on rising to the top and here I mentioned about rising to the top because rising to the top is very very hard work. There's no substitute for hard work in success. At the same time, for the countries that have reached the top, for example, the European Union I mentioned. Europe as a continent is in many ways seriously lost. It has lost its way. It really has no sense of direction. It doesn't have strong leaders. And most young people in Europe today are very pessimistic about their future; none of them believe that they will have a better life than their parents and that's because of sheer complacency on the part of Europeans. Who thought, at the end of the Cold War, we have arrived, we won the Cold War, we can do what we want to do, we don't have to adapt and to change. And that is why you notice that Europe today looks in some ways quite depressed. And I mention that also because, as you know, at the western end of the Indian Ocean, you get close to Europe.

And so if Europe was a powerful growth engine, it would help the Indian Ocean. But if Europe starts to slow down, then it also has problems. So the Indian Ocean, therefore, is somewhere in the middle between a very rapidly rising East Asia and a slowing down Europe. And the question is which of these two momentums will have a greater impact on the Indian Ocean.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you very much. When you were speaking, I was just wondering if there are possibilities for something like an Asian trading block or an Indian Ocean trading block?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I must say that I'm not skeptical of trading blocks, because there are trading blocks, but the reason why East Asian countries succeeded and Southeast Asian especially countries succeeded is because they plugged into globalization. And you know, even though today, as you know, United States has clearly turned away from globalization. Donald Trump doesn't believe his job is to work with other countries in the world. The Europeans have not turned away from globalization yet but they don't have the courage to defend the institutions that needed to preserve globalization, but I can tell you that in East Asia the countries want to continue with globalization and want to continue succeeding with it. So, even though there are trading blocks, they're not going to be the growth driver of the future. But of course, in the interim, while you're waiting for globalization, to restart again, some trading blocks are very useful and of course in the world's largest free trade agreement in the world is in East Asia. It's called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). It was initiated by the ten ASEAN countries, and then of course China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand are members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. ASEAN was very keen to get India to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. We delayed the start of the RCEP for three years to allow India to join, Unfortunately we failed to persuade India to join. But I think that sort of agreement will keep the Region going in the interim.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. I'd like to bring our Patron into this discussion because he's somebody who has spoken about joining these regional trading blocks like RCEP in the past, that Sri Lanka should try to join such groupings. Sir, what do you think about what Professor Mahbubani is saying? Do you think that there are possibilities for an Indian Ocean trading block or are you a bit more skeptical about it as well?

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Patron of the Geopolitical Cartographer
To me, the trading block is for the remaining Bay of Bengal countries to join with RCEP. It's not possible for us to create a trading block on our own. You have, as he said, two poles: either RCEP, East Asia/Southeast Asia, or Europe. So we have to join up with Southeast Asia and Eastern, the RCEP, because, anyway, the Gulf is virtually tariff free. Time to come, you will extend it into the eastern part of Africa. They are the trailblazers. in the Belt and Road initiative; they are getting into it, and it will just follow thereafter. But I agree, we have to go there.

Far as the EU is concerned, in my view, after the fall of the Soviet Union, they should have looked East. They looked at East Europe. They didn't look at the eastern part of the globe. So what they are going to do now? They have got bogged down on the issue of Ukraine, which should not have mattered earlier. They are not willing to fight for it, nor are they willing to get out of it. They are getting bogged down there. What Ukraine showed us, when you put sanctions on Russia, none of us followed it, and all of a sudden, Russia is. It shows sort of the type of power they had in China and India backing them; where Russia was able to go.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. If I can just do a follow-up as well, maybe with you, Professor Mahbubani.

You know, at our independence, it's often quoted that Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, looked at Ceylon as a benchmark for development in the Region at the time. Where do you think that Ceylon or Sri Lanka should have gone, or what held us back at the time?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
You're absolutely right, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew thought Sri Lanka should be the model for Singapore's economic development because he had come to Sri Lanka, I don't know, in the maybe the 1950s or 60s, and he saw how beautiful Colombo was, how beautiful Sri Lanka was.

By the way, when Singapore was created in 1965, everybody said Singapore was going to fail. There was nobody who predicted success for Singapore. Normally, when a country becomes independent, people go out on the streets and celebrate. When Singapore became independent in 1965, I was 17 years old then, and I walked the streets, and everybody was crying. They said Singapore cannot succeed as an independent state. And all this is documented in my memoirs that you mentioned, 'Living the Asian Century'. So it's quite remarkable that Singapore, which looked up to Sri Lanka and was supposed to fail, has done so well. Because, frankly, no other country in human history has lifted up the living standards of its people as quickly and as comprehensively as Singapore has done. When Singapore became independent, our per capita income was the same as Ghana at $500, right? Singapore was very poor. I mean, I know, I grew up in a house without a flush toilet. When I went to school at the age of six, I was put on a special feeding program because I was technically undernourished. Now, as you can all see, I'm overnourished [laughter]. But we were really, really poor, Singapore. And what's remarkable is that in my lifetime, our per capita income now is $88,000. They've gone from $500 to $88,000 in one lifetime, and of course, it's much higher than where the United Kingdom is, our former colonial ruler, and also higher than the United States. Well, that's remarkable. And clearly, is there a secret formula of Singapore's success?

When I was dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, I gave away the secret of Singapore's success free of charge. I called it the MPH formula. MPH doesn't mean miles per hour, by the way. M stands for Meritocracy, 'You select the best people to go into government to be the leaders.' And Singapore has done that religiously, amazingly, for 60 years now. And so the quality of mind of people in the Singapore government among the best in the world. It's a very rigorous form of selection— and we learned it from the Shell Oil Company how to select the best for leaders in the 60s and 70s. P stands for Pragmatism. Singapore's view is that no matter what problem Singapore encounters, it's never a new problem. Somebody somewhere has encountered that problem. We go and study how others have solved the problem and we copy them. So when Singapore was trying to develop its port, we went to Rotterdam and said, 'Why are you the best port in the world?' So we learned from Rotterdam. We copied them. And I can tell you in 1996, about 30 years after Singapore's independence, I accompanied the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, to go to Rotterdam. And the CEO of Rotterdam said to the Prime Minister of Singapore, 'Mr. Prime Minister, I'm very embarrassed. I'm here to brief you on the Port of Rotterdam, but honestly, the Port of Singapore is now much better than the port of Rotterdam. We should be learning from you, and you not learning from us.' 30 years, everything changed. What's that? That's a result of Pragmatism. But the third one, H, is the hardest one, and the one thing that brings countries down is the H factor, which is Honesty. And for whatever reason, by an accident of history, the three key founding fathers of Singapore, it wasn't one, wasn't solely Lee Kuan Yew. The three key founding fathers of Singapore are Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam, who, by the way, is of Sri Lankan Tamil origin, and these three men were amazingly honest, didn't take a penny in bribes, and were completely ruthlessly honest. And if government ministers accepted free holiday vacations from businessmen, the government ministers were sent to jail. That's what happened in Singapore. So that is the secret for Singapore's success.

And the strange thing is that this formula can be copied by any country in the world. Any country in the world can copy this. So when anyone asks me, can the Singapore success story be replicated? I say, of course, definitely it can be done.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you very much. President Wickramasinghe, would you like to comment on what Professor Mahbubani has just shared?

President Ranil Wickremesinghe
I agree with him. As of course we look at in Sri Lanka, we look at Lee Kuan Yew, in a different way; he came to Ceylon, a concept built up by D.S. Senanayake. Democracy of the open economy, of discipline and honesty. And then he was influenced by it and he carried it forward to Singapore, and then he developed Singapore. So in a way, we say, well, the actual successor of D.S. Senanayake has been Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.

What he has implemented are the policies that Mr. D. S. Senanayake carried out. It's Sri Lanka's bad luck that we missed all this.

Rishan de Silva
Bad luck and some decisions also.

Before we open this discussion to the floor, I just wanted to ask one more question, [Professor Mahbubani] mentioned the Trump administration, and I just wanted to ask [him] about the 'Trump Tariffs'. What do you think will be the impact of the 'Trump Tariffs' on world trade, and what should be done about the world trading system?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I mean, there's no question that the Trump tariffs, which are being implemented in a very random, arbitrary fashion, are a huge shock to the global trading system. And the shock is still being felt. I mean, countries are still waiting to find out what their tariff levels are. I think India doesn't know what its tariff levels are, Singapore doesn't know - we don't know yet. Lots of countries are waiting to find out. And even those that have found out, very few are celebrating? So it's a huge shock to the global trading system because it goes against some of the most fundamental principles that Western and American economists taught us. You know Ricardo's comparative advantage, and this is actually quite shocking, because America taught Singapore how to become a successful economy. We followed their lessons and we succeeded very well. And for Singapore, it's a shock saying, 'You told us that free trade is good. Right? You told us open up your market. You told us liberalize. You told us cut down tariffs. We did everything you asked us to do.' And the amazing thing about Singapore is that even though Singapore doesn't have a trade surplus with the US, we have a trade deficit with the US, and we have a free trade agreement with the US, but still we got hit by an initial 10% tariff.

When I tell you there is globally a state of shock over what President Trumps' tariffs are doing, but the long-term effects of it you cannot tell. Now there are at least two potential scenarios of how the world will react to Trump's tariffs. One possibility, which you cannot dismiss, is that other countries may say, 'If President Trump can increase tariffs, I will increase tariffs too, and I will impose tariffs on the world.' And what is actually quite amazing about our world, this is quite shocking to me, there are 193 countries in the world, not one country has followed President Trump in increasing tariffs. In fact, the vast majority of all the other trading countries in the world. There are countries that trade a lot with the world, there are countries that trade less with the world. But all the major trading countries in the world are not increasing their tariffs, in fact, they are stepping up their moves to increase their trade with the rest of the world.

So therefore, instead of the rest of the world following President Trump increasing tariffs, in scenario B, the rest of the world actually integrates more. As a result of President Trump's tariffs. So, for example, in ASEAN, in Southeast Asia. If you don't mind, if there's one message that I want you all to take away from this evening. The one part of the world that Sri Lanka should pay more attention to is ASEAN. ASEAN is a regional miracle. You know, in the year 2000, Japan was the world's second largest economy. Japan was eight times bigger than ASEAN. Eight times. Today, Japan is 1.1 times bigger than ASEAN. By 2030, Japan will be smaller than ASEAN. In 30 years. ASEAN has accomplished this. It's amazing. And this group of countries are far more diverse than the members of SAARC. SAARC, at the end of the day, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation, you share at least a common culture. You've been with each other for millennia. Whereas among the almost 700 million Southeast Asians, you have 250 million Muslims, 150 million Christians, 150 million Buddhists, you have Mahayana

Buddhists, Hinayana Buddhists, we have Taoists, we have Confucianists, we have Hindus, we have everything in Southeast Asia. We're known as the Balkans of Asia. This should be the region at war with each other. But amazingly, it has been amazingly successful. And now, in reaction to Trump's tariffs, the ASEAN countries could have said, 'OK.' or 'let's close our borders.' Instead they said, 'No, we will open our borders' and ASEAN now wants to trade more with its neighbors. So if there's one region of the world that is actually underappreciated by the world and to some extent maybe underappreciated here— it is ASEAN and yet where ASEAN goes you will see is an indicator where the world will turn.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. To President Wickremesinghe. I think you've spoken a bit about how Ceylon had the chance to join ASEAN in the past. It's very difficult now, obviously, to join ASEAN. But what are your thoughts on ASEAN as a trading bloc? And do you think that the BRICS+ could potentially offer some kind of opportunity that ASEAN did at the time, which we missed out on?

President Ranil Wickremesinghe
Basically, I look at ASEAN as the first trade arrangement in our area. Of course, it's in a place where traders from China and India met— what was called IndoChina. But if you are looking, as I said earlier, let's take RCEP - that is the key one. And within that, ASEAN is what is important to us. We need RCEP because through RCEP we can get to ASEAN and also at the BRI. China is with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But we have to go along with ASEAN because, if you take the Bay of Bengal, most of the other countries are in ASEAN. We have to get together with ASEAN and with Vietnam, which we have to link up so it's essential. In my view, after you do an agreement with India, then you must look at ASEAN also. There's China and Japan. Actually, we have at the moment two agreements, one with Singapore, one with Thailand, which we have not yet enforced, so it's useless talking on the others.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you both. At this point, we'd like to open it up to the floor. So we have one mic going around. If you could just raise your hand, and then the mic will come to you. In the meantime, we'll continue this discussion, but please raise your hand, and we can call on you as you wish.

Professor Mahbubani, you were speaking about regional multilateral processes, and you've spoken on the success of ASEAN in maintaining peace amongst its members. What are your thoughts on the BRICS+ vis the West, the WTO, and is there a new order emerging?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I mean the whole subject of BRICS and BRICS+ is a complex story. I mean, you have to compare the BRICS with the G7, right? The G7 is the established club of Western democracies and BRICS is the new club of, I guess, emerging economies, you know? And if you Google my writings, you'll find several times I've written about G7 versus BRICS. And clearly, if you look at it objectively, the G7 is a sunset organization. Right. The G7 share of global GNP, which is large, is going down, and the BRICS share global GNP, which is not as large as G7, is increasing. And clearly, BRICS will become bigger than G7. By the way, in PPP terms, BRICS is bigger than G7. In nominal terms, G7 is bigger than BRICS. And the trouble about the G7 is that you think it's very important because the Western media reports G7 meetings breathlessly, as though

they're very important. But actually, nowadays, meetings of the G7 are more like a meeting of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. There's only one country that decides. This is true. I mean, I'm not exaggerating. At G7 meetings, one country decides— United States— and the other six follow. They used to be independent. I mean, in the 80s and 90s, the European countries were much stronger and much more independent. Now they have become completely subservient, in fact, if you don't take my word for it, there's an article written in the New Yorker magazine by a good American writer whom I met, her name is Susan Glasser. She says that what the European countries are now following is a policy of strategic self-abasement. Strategic self-abasement means kowtowing. The Europeans are just kowtowing. That's their policy. In the long run, people will lose respect for countries that practice kowtowing.

In the BRICS, by contrast, there's no one country that dominates BRICS, even though China is much bigger than the other members of the BRICS, but it is not dominated by China. The other members have a strong enough say, but of course in life there are always complications. And one of the complications in BRICS is that two of the largest members have had troubled relations. This is a fact. China and India, as you know, after the clash in Galwan in June 2020, the relations between China and India became very bad. But the good news is that in the last six months, something is changing in the China-India relationship. We notice that many Indian leaders have gone to China, and the Foreign Minister was recently in China, so things seem to be improving between China and India. If you can stabilize the China-India relationship, then BRICS can become much stronger.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. I think I see Dhananath with a question. Go ahead.

Dhananath Fernando, CEO, Advocata Institute
Good evening. My name is Dhananath. I'm from Advocata Institute. On President Trump's tariff's, if you look at the trade deals that he's making with EU it seems more one-sided while you get 15% tariff on all imports to U.S. while duty-free from to the other side, so in that context it seems while you will have higher import tariff which will the U.S. consumer has to bear, at the same time with trillions of dollars of export generation within U.S., there may be also some economic growth or boom inside the U.S. How do you weigh it on a geopolitical context? Do you see something that we do not see? On a long-run basis, what is the impact?

And in President Trump's view, it seems he's trying to get control of the world, which may be an indication if you see what is happening between Azerbaijan and Armenia where China seems missing. and even with the strikes on Iran, it seems that he wants to give an indication of getting control back. Do you see it is opening after too much? Is it a strategy to get geopolitical power and also with a counter strategy of booming the U.S. exports so it's not like in isolation that you basically only put import tariff but you follow up with the export strategy. How do you see, on a geopolitical sense, or do you see something that we don't see?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I'm not sure I completely grasped your question. You were asking about the geopolitical effects of all these tariff measures, including the geopolitical effects on the US-EU relationship and the US-China relationship, and other relationships?

Dhananath Fernando

Yes, but with also a sort of follow-up, export strategy by the U.S., because they get 0% tariff to EU and they will have 15% tariff on imports from EU. So it's driven by a more export-driven bias from the US.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, you know, what is surprising the world so far is that in theory, Trump by raising tariffs on products from all over the world should have created a major shock to the global system and the global economic growth should have gone down sharply; global trade should have gone down sharply. But so far it hasn't happened. And so far, the opposite has happened. Everybody's surprised. In fact, the US stock market is at an all-time high. It's crazy. Something is not right here. In theory, what he has done should slow down global economic growth, in theory. In practice it hasn't. So. Right now, the world is still trying to figure out: What will be the impact of the tariffs? And frankly, we don't know. We don't know, at the end of the day, at what level will all these tariffs stabilize at. And then, how will the markets price in these tariffs? Because what is possible is that, as a result of Trump's tariffs, countries around the world will reduce their dependence on the US market and look for alternative markets. And don't forget that the big growth markets of the future are not in Europe and not in the US. The growth markets of the future. I give you one statistic. If you take the combined population of China, India, and ASEAN, China is 1. 4 billion people. India is 1. 4 billion people, and ASEAN is almost 700 million. Total: 3. 5 billion people, China, India, ASEAN. Remember them as the CIA countries. Right? In the year 2000, out of 3. 5 billion people, the total middle class population of 3.5 billion people was only 150 million. Only 25 years ago, only 150 million in the middle class. By 2020, that number had exploded ten times to 1.5 billion. And by 2030, the middle class population of China, India, and ASEAN could reach almost 3 billion people. These 3 billion people represent the new middle class of the world. That's where the growth in demand for products is going to come from. Not from Europe and not from the United States.

So therefore, it is possible that the rest of the world says, 'Okay, we will find other ways of growing our economy.' and if that happens, global economic growth can continue. But it requires the rest of the world to adapt intelligently to these changes that are happening. But right now, I can tell you, President Trump has only been in office six months. It's far too early to tell what will be the effects of the other moves that he has made. And certainly, you also understand, in terms of geopolitics, something has changed in the world. Because what is shocking is that, again, there are 193 countries in the world, 192 minus the United States. How many countries have stood up to the United States? One. China. Only one country retaliated against the United States, and successfully retaliated. So it shows you now clearly which are the two most powerful countries in the world? So the Europeans kowtow and China fought back.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. Other questions?

Professor, you mentioned that India and China are now meeting together a bit more regularly. In our part of the world, we have the saying ‘When the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled, and we've seen that in some cases’. I was in Nepal earlier this year, and I saw some cases of that over there, and we've had it also in Sri Lanka in some cases. Do you think this provides an opportunity for countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, like Singapore had? Or do you think that we could miss the boat, by now not being a part of those discussions?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I think, you know, I'm not an expert on the relations among the members of SAARC, South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation. I do know your leaders have not met for many years. By the way, ASEAN leaders meet every year. Even when they have fights with each other, they still keep on meeting. That's the difference. And that's why I think, frankly, SAARC should study ASEAN and see what lessons SAARC can learn from ASEAN.

In the case of Sri Lanka or Nepal, and all that, at the end of the day, one of the iron laws of geopolitics is that whatever great powers do will have effects on you. So, clearly the US-China geopolitical contest, which is going to accelerate over the next 10 years, will have implications for everybody— but you hope that there won't be other big geopolitical contests. If you can stabilize the China-India relationship, I would say, it's good for South Asia. It's certainly good for Southeast Asia because Southeast Asia wants to have good ties with China and wants to have good ties with India. And we don't want to take sides. Same, we want to be good friends of the United States, we want to be good friends of China. We don't want to take sides. And so that is the policy of the ASEAN countries. But in the case of each individual SAARC country, you will have to work out what your options are, what you can do. You know?

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. Mrs. Deen.

Amb. Pamela J. Deen, Director General, BIDTI
Thank you, Professor, for your views, which we appreciate always. My question is that last night we saw that the EU and US have agreed to some effect of settling the tariff. But this morning we learned that some countries in the European Union This morning we heard some countries in the European Union were not happy with the outcome of last night's achievements, do you think that this would disintegrate the European Union?

Thank you.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I mean, you're right. I have seen the same reports that you have seen. In fact, there's a very good article in the Financial Times today saying something which I agree with, that the European Union made a major strategic mistake by not retaliating immediately like China did. You know when Trump imposed tariffs, China immediately retaliated. The US hit back, China increased its tariffs, and then China established a line saying, 'If you push me, I will push back.'

The European Union didn't dare to retaliate, and they made a strategic mistake. Because once you show that you can be, people can walk all over you, people will walk all over you. And that's what happened to the, sadly, to the European Union. I've read the same report, but it's very difficult for the European Union because trade is being delegated to the Commission.

The individual European Union countries cannot negotiate on trade. That's been delegated to the Commission. The Commission has the powers to make the deal. So if the Commission has made the deal, then I think the European Union will have to live with it. But of course, the larger question is, what impact will this have geopolitically on Europe? And sadly, I mean— I want Europe to do well by the way. I'm not anti-European. It's good for the world to have a strong European Union rather than a weak European Union. But to have a strong European Union, you must need leaders of caliber and unfortunately, the reality of the reason why the European Union has lost its way is that the quality of mind of European leaders today is not what it used to be and I don't claim credit for this insight. I had a one-on-one conversation with Henry Kissinger about one year before he died.

And he was lamenting to me privately how the Europeans are not thinking longterm and not thinking strategically. So, for example, on the Ukraine war, it was eminently avoidable. It was a war that could have been avoided. If the Europeans had shown some geopolitical common sense and found ways of understanding that Russia has got security concerns too, you've got to take care of Russia's security concerns. You just can't say Russia's concerns don't matter. It was geopolitical incompetence that led to this Ukraine war and what's really made matters worse is that the European Union tried to punish the rest of the world for not joining them in the Ukraine war when the Ukraine war is a result of their incompetence. Right? So the problems that the European Union faces are not just with the United States. The European Union has got to find a way of adjusting and adapting to a very different world. But to adjust and adapt to a different world, you need leaders with, you know, who think long-range, who think strategically, and who think carefully. And the European Union doesn't have those kinds of leaders and that's why it's losing its way now. And so, you know, if you want to go to a place that's genuinely depressed about the future, go to the European Union.

Rishan de Silva
Well, Professor, I think President Wickremesinghe has to head off.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe
Excuse me, but I agree with you only one more thing. In Asia, no one gets to be a leader until he's 60. That's the strength.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you Sir. If I can ask the former Foreign Minister if he will join us on the stage, that would be great.

Professor, in the past you've mentioned that, well, you said it was a fallacy to believe in the universalization of Western liberal democracy promulgated by Francis Fukuyama. As I quote, you said, 'it put the West to sleep at precisely the moment that China and India were waking up.' We have come out of a year of elections where this proved somewhat accurate. And just recently we saw how Singapore held a successful democratic election earlier this year. You're now seated in Asia's oldest democracy, as we have had universal suffrage since the early 1930s. As a Singaporean, what would you say are the benefits of democracy that we must strive to hold on to?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I think, you know, the word 'democracy' is as you know a word that is worshipped in the West. And certainly I think it's good that the Western countries have adopted democratic forms of government. But what the Western democracies have forgotten is that the most difficult form of government is the democratic form of government. And they assume it's easy. The reason why I say that Francis Fukuyama's essay put the West to sleep is because the West thought that at the end of the Cold War, they had won. Their system was correct. They didn't have to change their system. Only the rest of the world has got to adjust and adapt and because the European Union became so complacent, it therefore lost its way. Whereas democracies the reason why they are

difficult. This is strange. It's Western philosophers who have warned Western minds about the dangers of democracy. And one of the biggest dangers of democracy, as Plato said, is that you get populism. People will vote for something that will benefit the masses and will not necessarily benefit the country. And so the Europeans have now locked themselves into a situation, and this is said by European leader, Jean-Claude Juncker, former Prime Minister of Luxembourg. He said, 'We the European leaders know what to do. But we don't know how to get elected after we do it.'So it shows you the problem about democracy. Now most European countries are living beyond their means. They are borrowing from the future to pay for their living standards of today. But if any European politician tells the people, 'We must stop punishing our grandchildren. We should cut our benefits to help our grandchildren,' he won't be elected. Right, so democracies— democratic forms of government— are very difficult. And unfortunately, in most democracies, there's a race to the bottom. Therefore, it's the parties that promise the people everything get elected, whereas the parties that promise the right solution, which is work hard, have discipline, cut down your benefits, they don't get elected. And today in Europe, by the way, it's amazing. If you had an election tomorrow in the United Kingdom, it's possible that the party of Farage may win. Right-wing populist. If you had an election in France tomorrow, Le Pen's party may have the highest number of votes. If you have an election in Germany today, AFD may get higher votes than the Social Democrats. Now this is something quite stunning, you know. And this is what happens when you don't understand that when you have a democratic system. The leaders had to work super hard to persuade their population that there are no easy solutions in life. That at the end of the day, if Europe wants to come back to high growth, there have to be sacrifices. People have to cut some of their benefits. You have to bring the budgets down. You have to get work discipline again. You have to increase the numbers of hours you work every week. All these things are commonsensical solutions, but no European leader can suggest it.

Rishan de Silva
If I can bring the Foreign Minister into this discussion, Mr. Sabri.

What would you have to say about this? How do you think we should work through something like this?

Former Foreign Minister, Mr. Ali Sabri PC
Thank you, Professor, for that very insightful opinion on how populism works.

I think in our part of the world we have seen the effect of it. Every time a rational merit-based program had been introduced, then at the elections it will get defeated. That has repeatedly happened.

But one thing I would like to know from you, being in Singapore and being in the highest strata of the governance, how Singapore, while maintained in that discipline, had continued to win the elections? And as a result of which there is consistency and consistency has led to the results of what you are enjoying today. So, in our part of the world, there is lack of consistency because government comes, government goes, they reverse the previous government decisions. and this really hurts the whole population in the long run. I know you were talking about MPH - very well articulated. But apart from that, how do you manage with this single party over the long period of time, able to win election after election, which end of the day had led to this consistency? What do you have to say on that?

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, I wish I could give you some easy answers. There are no easy answers. For a start, I mean, Singapore's one extraordinary piece of luck. We were lucky that the three founding fathers of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, Rajaratnam, and I worked with all three of them personally, and I described them in my memoirs, they were amazingly brilliant. Amazing! I mean, shockingly brilliant. I've met world leaders in the course of five decades of international relations work, and the quality of mind of these Singapore leaders, I came to realize, was far superior to any of the world leaders that I had met. This is amazing. And then of course, that was the first generation. And then the second generation, clearly, they would themselves acknowledge, they were not in the same league as the first generation. But nonetheless, they inherited the legacy of Lee Kuan Yew and made it stronger, and more deeply entrenched, and the second generation leaders actually grew the Singapore economy significantly too. Then we had a third generation, and amazingly, the third generation also continued growing the Singapore economy.

So when people ask, 'why are people voting back the PAP?' Very simple, as Ronald Reagan said, 'are you better off than you were five years ago?' Every five years, the Singapore population is better off. I mean, your per capita income goes from $500 to $88,000, every five years there's an improvement, right? And don't forget the Singapore government has put in place public policies that ensure that our infant mortality went down sharper than any other country. Our life expectancy has increased significantly. In Singapore, you know, you get access to probably one of the best education systems in the world, public education. The best in the world. There's something known as PISA scores. Have you heard of PISA scores? P-I-S-A. Singapore is either number one or number two in PISA scores. You can get healthcare in Singapore. That's not free. It's not free, but it's affordable. It's among the best in the world. We are very small, Singapore. Very small. Less than 5 million people. India has got 1.4 billion people. India doesn't have any universities among the top 10. We do. Singapore does. Right? Now all this, by the way, takes extraordinary effort, discipline, hard work, dedication, and honesty. And it's amazing that it's been carried through. generation by generation by generation.

It's remarkable, you know. the Singapore story. And I think that's why for a country like Sri Lanka, I hope you will take a look at my memoirs; if you look at my memoirs, you will see very vivid descriptions of how poor and third world Singapore was when I was a child, and then where it is today, and what were the milestones along our growth— so I would say, look at my memoirs, and you will see, you'll understand the Singapore story better.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. I see two questions in our audience. One from the former Foreign Secretary, Aruni Wijewardena, and then the Deputy Ambassador of Thailand, Arthit Prasartkul.

Former Foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka, Mrs. Aruni Wijewardena
Professor Mahbubani, thank you excellency for all the very perceptive insights you have given so far on a number of issues related to trade and also Singapore's success. I'd like to shift the focus a little bit to the ocean, which is also part of what you have been discussing so far. and a similarity also with Sri Lanka because some of our future success on the economic front and principally also Singapore's is its port, its ocean location, its ocean trade, and ASEAN etc. So returning to the banner of Geopolitical Cartographer and the ocean, I'd like to shift to that domain.

Now, previously, we said land was the terrain of geopolitical contestation, and now, once again, in a rotation, the ocean is a domain of geopolitical contestation. and Singapore is very strategically located given your position in between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean and also, similarly, Sri Lanka. Also, you spoke about your port. and the success of that. Now what I would like to hear from you is how do you balance this, because with the relevance of trade comes, of course, other principles of open sea lanes of communication, free trade, freedom of navigation, etc. On the other hand, with the geopolitical contestation comes the security dimension. Now, I would like to hear from you how you manage and how Singapore sees this new ocean domain in the context of this current Geopolitical Cartographer scenario.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Well, thank you. You're absolutely right when you said that Singapore is strategically located at a very good point. Singapore has got no natural resources at all. But the only natural resource we have is our location. And we have been at a meeting point of trade between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. A lot of it passes through Singapore. And you're right, the oceans are going to be a major area of contestation. You're absolutely right. And certainly in the US-China contest, the fight for naval supremacy will be part of the contest also. But what we hope is that you can have this contest, but in this contest, if you trade freely, trade is not a zero sum game. Trade is a positive sum game. And so for us, we hope that by keeping the sea lanes free, we open our doors to everyone. And that's actually what the ASEAN countries are doing. They opened the doors to trade with the United States, and they opened the doors to trade with China. We get investments from the United States, we get investments from China.

And I can tell you, by the way, what ASEAN has done. Some examples of how spectacular the process has been. In the year 2000, to ASEAN's surprise, China proposed a free trade agreement to the ASEAN countries. At that time, trade between China and ASEAN was only $40 billion. But as a result of signing that free trade agreement within China and ASEAN, trade between China and ASEAN went up from $40 billion to $975 billion dollars by 2022, making it the world's largest trading relationship. Right? Nobody knows this. It's an amazing story. Now on the other side, what people don't know, is that our links to the United States are equally strong. United States has invested more in ASEAN than it has in China, Japan, South Korea, India combined. See, you didn't know this. So the answer to your question is, try and be as open as you can be. Link up with the rest of the world as much as you can. Because the more open you are, the more you will succeed.

And by the way, there's a book, I reviewed for Bloomberg a few months ago written by this British historian who's very famous in India, William Dalrymple. His book is called 'The Golden Road'. And if you read 'The Golden Road', you will see that a thousand years ago, there was a lot of trade already between South Asia, and the Persian Gulf region, and within South Asia and Southeast Asia. Right, that was, you know, that a thousand years ago was when the Indian Ocean was thriving. Why was it thriving? Because you were open. India was very open to trade. Much more open than it is in some ways today. So certainly this region can do much better, but you've got to have the courage to say, 'Okay, we will open up.' AAnd I would say just watch ASEAN over the next 10 years. You'll be quite amazed to see what will change there.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you. I think Deputy Ambassador of Thailand, Arthit Prasartkul has one question and that would be the last question.

Arthit Prasartkul, Deputy Ambassador of Thailand
I just want to hear more of your views on ASEAN. You have touched upon ASEAN and Southeast Asia in many ways and ASEAN is what you and your generation has built and it comes to this current day ASEAN. As a younger generation, I would like to hear your views on what can we see or what do you expect ASEAN to be the next 10 years. Are you satisfied with ASEAN today? Is it what you expected?

Also your views on the expansion of membership. You see ASEAN admitting new membership. You have mentioned that Sri Lanka should look more to ASEAN? Will there be a possibility of ASEAN admitting Sri Lanka or some other, our neighbouring countries? Thank you, Ambassador.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani
As you know, the ASEAN story is a very, again, a complex story. I have written a book, by the way. It's called The ASEAN Miracle. It has been translated into all the Southeast Asian languages, including Thai, by the way, and I explained that ASEAN succeeded because of three four-letter words.

The first four-letter word begins with F. It's spelled F-E-A-R. Fear. When ASEAN was founded, the five non-communist countries were very frightened of the waves of communist expansion in Southeast Asia. It was fear that brought the countries together to sign the ASEAN Declaration on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok.

The second four-letter word is luck. We had exceptionally good leaders. And there was a very unusual friendship between the leader of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, and the leader of Indonesia, Suharto. It's an amazing friendship. And at the same time, we were helped by the United States, certainly in the early years, as part of the Cold War.

And then the third four-letter word, you will never guess. It begins with G. It's spelled G-O. If Golf. You all think I'm joking. But you have no idea. Absolutely no idea how many of the difficult decisions and difficult compromises within ASEAN were resolved on the golf course. You have absolutely no idea. And I can tell you that India and Pakistan would not be fighting so many wars if the generals played golf with each other regularly. That's my simple solution for the India-Pakistan problem. And that's the reason why there have been no wars in Southeast Asia most of the time. I mean, you've had skirmishes as you had recently. But the reason why you have no major outright wars is that the generals are thinking about the next golf game they're going to have with each other. They don't want to spoil the golf game. And it's amazing. Everyone thinks it's a joke, you know. But one of our former foreign ministers, Professor Jayakumar, who's a very good golfer, has written about how he did so much he got so many things done at the golf course. So there it's all about at the end of the day building up human relationships. ASEAN now has 1,000 meetings a year. One thousand. Can you imagine the personal networks we have developed in Southeast Asia? The trust that we have in each other. That's amazing. And in some ways, the trust we have with each other is higher than even in Europe, in some ways, which is quite remarkable. So that's why the ASEAN story is a story that must be understood better in this part of the world.

Rishan de Silva
Thank you very much, Professor. Mr. Sabry, would you like to share any final remarks?

Former Foreign Minister, Mr. Ali Sabri PC

Yeah, we always compare ASEAN and what has happened to the SAARC region. So that one of the reasons probably we had failed to build that personal bonding and the relationship between the parties or the leaders in the region. But if, for us, to kick start the SAARC again and to give some momentum into it, you know, so we have been— small countries like Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, and Nepal— have been very interested in getting SAARC into action. But by going through the difficult partnership between India and Pakistan, obviously, we have a deadlock here and a stalemate. So what do you suggest countries like us could do? From your probably some of those interesting where you always say that you study the previous— I read that from Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's book also, he says that there is always precedence on this, studies that, learn from that and copy the best option. So in that sense, I'm sure that ASEAN also would have gone through difficult relationships and different times. But what do you suggest, how do we kick-start at least the negotiations on the SAARC? I mean, I know big hopes, but this has to be started somewhere.

Professor Kishore Mahbubani

One lesson I learned after 33 years of diplomacy is that there are within diplomacy some wicked problems that are almost impossible to solve. I've seen a lot of great minds trying to find peace between Israel and Palestine now for 50 years, and every day the news on Israel and Palestine gets worse and worse and worse. So there are some wicked problems that are very difficult to resolve. Sadly, I find that the India-Pakistan relationship is a very difficult one. Very difficult one. Frankly what what happens in ASEAN is that when two countries have a problem, the other countries apply peer pressure on them and say, 'Okay, we understand you have a problem. Just pipe down. Okay, we got to carry on.' And the peer pressure helps a lot. So I think it's up to the other members of SAARC to actually apply peer pressure on India and Pakistan and say, 'Hey, at the end of the day, we are neighbors. You can choose your friends. You cannot choose your neighbors. And so we all have to find ways and means. of living with each other. And even though your neighbor can be difficult, will be difficult, there's still ways and means of getting along with each other.’

And that is, at the end of the day, the biggest achievement of ASEAN. You might say, 'Hey, this cannot be solved because Pakistan and India both claim Kashmir, for example.' But you know, how many of you know that even today, Philippines is claiming a state of Malaysia, Sabah. Till today. Even though they're fellow members of ASEAN. Right? But we carry on. See, which is why there is a hidden genius within ASEAN. And in my book, ASEAN miracle. I say that the reason why we learn to get along is that Indonesia, as a country and a culture, injected the culture of consultation and consensus. Mushabara and mufakat. Two Indonesian words. So the slow process of consultation, consensus, consultation, consensus, very slow, very slow process. Therefore, ASEAN cooperation is very slow. But it doesn't matter. They move overhead.

So there are certain cultural things that ASEAN has developed, that I think SAARC can study and say, 'Okay, how do we inject the same thing into self?' Because I mean, it's amazing. I mean, ASEAN's growth story— I mean, it's absolutely amazing. You know, I don't have the data on ASEAN's share of global trade. Please go back and Google and check. Go and check how much ASEAN's share of global trade has grown. You'd be surprised. That's what ASEAN has done.

Rishan de Silva

Thank you very much, Professor. Ladies and gentlemen, that brings us to the end of our discussion today. Please join me in thanking Professor Mahbubani.