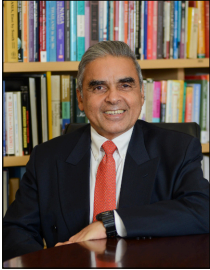


# Prospects for relations between USA and China after the US elections in 2024

*Kishore Mahbubani\* in dialogue*



Kishore Mahbubani.  
(Picture ma)

*Former President of the United Nations Security Council and well-known diplomat and scientist from Singapore, Kishore Mahbubani, explains in simple, honest words the greatest global contest in the history of mankind: between the USA and China. He was invited by the "Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research" for a dialogue in July 2024.*

*Moderator: I want to start our conversation by asking the following question: With the up-coming US election by the end of this year, are we expected to witness a real potential change in the US foreign policy towards China? Is it a state policy or a policy attributable to the president himself?*

*Prof. Kishore Mahbubani: Well, the answer I'm going to give you is a very paradoxical one. On the one hand the outcome of the elections could change nothing, on the other hand it could change everything. So, why do I give this paradoxical answer? Because it's very clear that even though the United States, as we all know today, is a deeply divided society where Americans cannot agree on anything, there's only one thing they agree on: It's time to stop China.*

*So regardless of who's the president, the mission to stop China will continue. And that policy has become deeply embedded in both the establishment and the society. And everyone seems*



Conference hall of the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research during the talk with Kishore Mahbubani.  
(Picture ma)

to agree that this is the time for the United States to stop China.

But at the same time the reason why I say it could change everything is that if *Donald Trump* wins, which is certainly possible, I think you can never tell what he is going to do.

He could go either extreme way. Certainly, he'll carry on the contest against China, there's no question about that at all. But how? He could make things a lot worse, much much worse. So therefore, we must prepare ourselves for all possibilities. Certainly, if you come from a small state like the *United Arab Emirates (UAE)* or Singapore as I do, you have to recognize that we – whether we like it or not – are now witnessing the largest geopolitical contest ever seen in human history.

And I say the largest geopolitical contest because we've never had powers of the size and scale of the United States today and China going

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\*\* The *Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR)* was established in 1994 with the objective of furthering research and academic studies of political, economic and social matters pertinent to the "United Arab Emirates" (UAE), the Arab Gulf region and the wider Arab world.

The Center supports decision-makers, hosts conferences and symposia, organizes workshops, sponsors a lecture series and publishes original and translated books and research papers.

Cf. <https://www.ecssr.ae/en/>

head-to-head. And because this is such an immense geopolitical contest it will rock the world and it will affect all of us, no matter what we do, no matter where we live. And that's why we need to understand this and that's why I think it's very timely that you are having this dialogue here in the United Arab Emirates.

*You said that all the Americans agree on one thing which is to stop China. So, does that mean the US has some strategy or a grand strategy to stop China or is it more related to each president and his way of dealing with China?*

Well, I'm glad you used the words "grand strategy", because when I was writing my book "Has China won?" I had the privilege of having a very long one on one lunch with somebody who was then clearly America's greatest living strategic thinker, *Henry Kissinger*. It was a long lunch; one hour and a half, two hours – and at the end of the lunch when I went back, I asked myself what the message was that Henry Kissinger was trying to get to me. After I reflected on my conversation with him, it became clear to me, that the message he was telling me was that the biggest strategic mistake that the United States is making in this contest against China is that it has launched this contest without a strategy.

That's a very profound thing to say. So, I had to write to Henry Kissinger to have it confirmed. I wrote: Dear Henry, thank you for the lunch. Do you mind if I cite you saying this in my book, and fortunately he gave me his permission. So, the fact that someone as senior and as well informed as Henry Kissinger can say there's no strategy is a very important point. And is also confirmed by the evidence.

While we know for sure that the United States will carry out actions in one way or another against China. It's not clear what the goal is. I mean, is the goal to stop China's economic development? This cannot be done. Is the goal to overthrow the *Chinese Communist Party*? This cannot be done. Is the goal to successfully contain and isolate China, like the way the United States successfully isolated and contained the Soviet Union? This cannot be done.

So, if it is not clear what the goals are – people are asking you've launched this contest, what is your end game? What would constitute a victory for you? And as you know, that has never been spelled out by anybody except once I think. President *Joe Biden* mentioned the

Chinese aim to become No.1 in passing and said: "It ain't gonna happen on my watch."

So, basically what he's saying is, I will not allow the Chinese economy to overtake the US economy while I'm still president.

So clearly, if you look at all the actions that have been taken, the tariffs, the chip

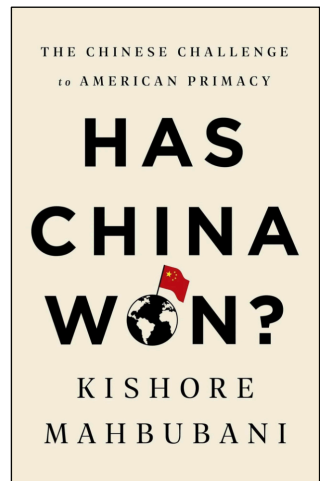
war, they're all designed in one way or another, to slow down the Chinese economic growth. In some ways, I think the United States has made a rational calculation that if and when the Chinese economy becomes number one, everything changes. And the very privileged position that the United States has had – for one hundred and thirty, one hundred and forty years – as the number one power in the world, that can change.

And here I want to emphasize that I do believe – and this is also the result of my conversation with Henry Kissinger – that there's a wiser strategy for the United States. Instead of trying to stop China, the United States should try to work with China to create a world which has enough space for two big powers.

And that was a strategy the former president *Bill Clinton* suggested in a speech that he gave in Yale in 2003. In my book "Has China won?" I cite the speech he gave. Bill Clinton said: If the US is going to be No. 1 forever, then you can keep on drinking your drink. However, he added a "but". He said: "But we can conceive a world where we are no longer No. 1. Then surely, it's in the United States interests to build multilateral institutions, multilateral processes, multilateral rules, multilateral norms. That would in one way or another constrain China, and that would be a wiser strategy."

Those of us who are friends of the US and friends of China should therefore be advocating to both, why don't you adopt a wiser strategy? That would be better for both of you and better for us, instead of this rather destructive zero-sum game that is being played out now.

*This leads me to two questions. The first one you mentioned that they are trying to prevent China*



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from being No. 1. How do you define No. 1 in this world? Are we talking in economic or political terms? Or what exactly. And does China really want to be No. 1 in this world?

That's actually a very good question. The first definition of being No. 1 in the world is definitely the economic dimension. Because if you have the largest economy that gives you a lot of weight. But I want to emphasize that what I haven't mentioned so far is the complexity of the US-China contest.

And in some ways, it is hinted at in your question. It's a multi dimension contest. It's being played out in economics, in the military dimension, in the political dimension and in the so-called soft power dimension.

So, it is conceivable for the United States to become in nominal GDP terms the No. 2 power, yet remain the No. 1.

It is the most influential power in the world if it does adopt a wise strategy. So, e.g. I can tell you, the most powerful weapon the United States has in the world is not its aircraft carriers or its F-35 jets – it's the US dollar.

Because the power of the US dollar means that you can impose sanctions. And you can take away \$300 billion from Russia. That is what it can do.

So, there are ways and means for the US to remain the most influential power in the world, even if it's nominal GDP becomes No. 2.

And in response to your specific question – does China want to become No. 1 – the answer is yes and no. Why do I say yes and no? Yes, because they want to have the world's largest economy because they know at the end of the day what will protect China is having the largest economy in the world.

At the same time the Chinese don't have the same ambition the United States does to run the world. The US – as you know – is present in all corners of the world, intervening in this issue, intervening in that issue, taking care of this problem, taking care of that problem.

The Chinese view is that we are 1.4 billion people, we have enough problems at home, we will take care of our problems, the world will take care of itself. So, in that sense I don't think the Chinese have a desire to step into the shoes of the United States in terms of its global involvement in various issues.

I'm looking for ways and means of creating a world where the United States and China can

live together in peace without having to go at loggerheads with each other.

*You just said the United States doesn't have any strategy regarding China. Let's go to the other side. How about the Chinese? Do they have a grand strategy in dealing with the US?*

Well, as the weaker party – if they didn't have a strategy they'd be in deep trouble. I think out of necessity they must have a strategy, and they do have one.

So, e.g. they ask themselves the obvious question: Why did the United States successfully defeat the Soviet Union? Why? And I must say, the one country that has studied the collapse of the Soviet Union more carefully than any country in the world is China, because China knows the dream of the United States is to make China the second Soviet Union that collapses. So, how does China prevent a collapse?

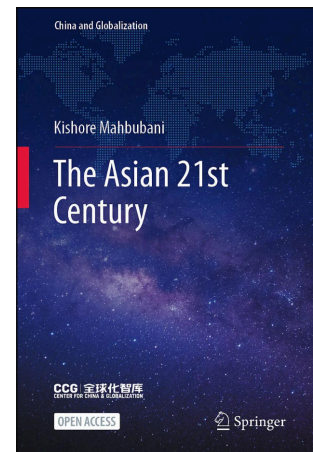
First point: the Soviet Union didn't collapse because of external pressures. It collapsed because of internal weaknesses. And so, China realizes to make sure I survive I must have a very strong dynamic economy and a strong dynamic society.

There was a very famous American thinker – *George Kennan* – who said way back in 1949: "At the end of the day the outcome of the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union will depend not on our weapons and troops and all that, it will depend on which society has got greater spiritual vibrancy inside.

The United States society was far more dynamic than the Soviet Union society. The US thrived; the Soviet Union collapsed.

So, the Chinese know that the priority is to make sure the economy is strong, and your society is strong. Which is why they are massively educating their people and growing their economy, so that they don't become a second Soviet Union.

The second point the Chinese learnt from the collapse of the Soviet Union was that the US succeeded because it managed to get a lot of the neighbours of the Soviet Union to join the containment policy. Western Europe, Japan, South Korea. Both ends of the Soviet Union.



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So, what did the Chinese do? The Chinese launched a “pre-emptive strike” against a containment policy, by making sure that its neighbours are dependent on the Chinese economy. I can give you a simple example. You know Singapore is part of Southeast Asia and we are part of an organization called ASEAN.

ASEAN started as a pro American organization. In fact, when ASEAN was created on 8 August 1967; both the Soviet Union and China denounced the creation of ASEAN as a pro American organization. And it is true. ASEAN was pro American, pro-western. And what was stunning was, that even though ASEAN was pro American and pro-western we had long dialogues with the United States, the European Union, Australia, Japan.

None of our Western friends proposed a free trade agreement to ASEAN. The first country to propose a free trade agreement to ASEAN was China in 2001. And the impact of that China-ASEAN agreement was phenomenal.

In the year 2000 – and that’s when China proposed a free trade agreement – ASEAN’s trade with the United States was 135 billion and our trade with China was only 40 billion. So, the US trade was more than three and a half times what the China and ASEAN trade was. But because of the free trade agreement by 2022 – even though ASEAN’s trade with the US has gone from 135 to 450/500 billion, an increase of over three times – China’s trade with ASEAN went from 40 billion to 975 billion dollars, almost a trillion dollars.

In 2022 this was the world’s largest trading relationship. There was no way that ASEAN would join the containment policy against its largest trading partner. It would be crazy. So that’s part of the Chinese strategy and I mention a third one very quickly.

You take that *Belt and Road Initiative* that China has launched, building infrastructure in all corners of the world. What does that mean? Every country in the world says: Oh, this infrastructure is good. I need Chinese fast trains; I need Chinese highways. Would you then join a containment policy? You wouldn’t. It shows you that they have systematically worked out a grand strategy.

But at the same time, I can tell you that the Chinese also have a lot of respect for the United States. They understand that the United States is a power, a remarkable power. So, that chal-

lenge remains even with all this strategy. They cannot underestimate what the United States can eventually do.

*Professor, you have mentioned before – also in our discussion earlier today – that the US has 10 years to counter the rise of China. Why specifically 10 years?*

Well, I think it’s all a matter of mathematics. If the Chinese economy keeps growing at 5% a year over 10 years – I don’t have the maths off the top of my head – even if it doesn’t overtake the US, it comes very, very close. And the bigger China gets, the harder it is to stop.

It’s quite clear, that the Chinese have been rather ingenious in creating a long-term manufacturing strategy for China. And that manufacturing capability of China is now indispensable to the rest of the world.

If you open your kitchen cupboard or whatever it is – take out the products, see how many of the components in any of the products came from China. Just check. You’ll be amazed. This is not by accident. China wants to create a deep dependence on China’s manufacturing sector. And you know, even 5 or ten years ago, if you had asked anybody whether China could ever join the competition for cars – the answer would have been no way. The Germans are so far ahead, the Japanese are so far ahead, Koreans are far ahead, even the Americans are far ahead. But you know what? The Chinese have started from scratch and created an electric vehicle, an EV industry, that is now frightening the pans of all car makers all over the world. Because the Chinese manufacturing ecosystem on EV’s is so amazing.

Even *Elon Musk* at first dismissed it. Now he wouldn’t dare to dismiss it.

This EV, this challenge from China emerged by accident and is now part of the long-term strategy. Five years from now you will see Chinese EV’s all over the world.

As the world transforms and becomes more dependent on China, it narrows the options for the United States. Quite naturally. Which is why there is a very strong sense of urgency in Washington DC. Just look what happens there. Some Americans like *Robert Lighthizer* and *Matt Pottinger* will be coming back for advice. They and Trump are the ones who are saying hurry up, we got to act fast. So, the sense of urgency in Washington DC is very real.

*This leads me to the next question. What are the measures that the US could take to counter the rise of China and are the measures going to differ from Biden to Trump?*

Well, I think, the best answer to your question what the United States should do, was given by George Kennan in his remark 1949 I quoted earlier. At the end of the day, the outcome of the contest will depend on which country's domestic society is stronger. And sadly, the challenge for the United States today is that it has become a deeply divided society.

In my book "Has China won?" in chapter 7 I provide a lot of empirical data. They are taken from American scholars by the way – people like *Paul Walker*, former head of the FED, *Joe Stiglitz*, a Nobel Laureate or *Martin Wolf* from the "Financial Times". They have all given data to show how the United States has essentially become a plutocracy.

What is a plutocracy? A plutocracy is a society where public policy decisions are made not to benefit the majority at the bottom but the top 1% or 2%. Whatever I'm saying is not original from me. American scholars have been saying all this, I'm just repeating what they are saying.

And the reason why it looks as though Trump is going to get elected is that the bottom 50% in America – the data shows this – haven't seen an improvement in their standard of living for 30 to 40 years. In fact, the American middle class has diminished significantly. Therefore, if the United States wants to win the contest against China it should rebuild the strength of its domestic society, that should be its priority.

Because at the end of the day – like in any athletic contest you are better off trying to win by running faster, rather than trying to kneecap your opponent. That's really the best thing the United States could do. But changing the United States society and taking care of plutocracy is going to be a major challenge. That must be the answer for the United States. [...]

*Talking about Trump – given his previous policies in which he focused more in reducing overseas commitments, to what extent do you think he may seek to conclude a deal with China, where this deal would involve ensuring that China bears part of the security burdens in the Middle East, specifically now?*

One important thing to tell you about Trump is that anything is possible. To use another example – let me go and switch for one second to Ukraine – Trump could either say: "I'm gonna go all the way, I'm gonna defeat Putin" – then he pumps up resources and goes full scale in the Ukraine. Or he could do the exact opposite. He could say: "This war is of no interest to me, let the Europeans fight this war, I'm walking away." His slogan is MAGA (Make America great again), so he's not interested in the Ukraine war.

And as you know for some strange reason, he got this dislike for Ukraine – I don't know why. It's a complicated story and he has also got a strange dislike for the Europeans. I asked an American friend of mine, why does he dislike the Europeans? And my friend gave me a very profound answer. He said, all his life Donald Trump wanted to get accepted by society, especially elite American society. Even though he was very wealthy, he was never accepted. He was an out-sider. So, when you're an out-sider you develop this psychological angst and anger – so he has this anger against the American establishment and in some ways the Europeans also personify the old rich establishment. The Europeans look at him with disdain, so he says: "Ok, now I'll teach you who is the boss. "

So, there is a very complicated relationship between Trump and the Europeans. Therefore, in Ukraine he could do either thing. Similarly on China.

But I think concerning China, Donald Trump has bought the main thesis that the United States cannot allow China to become No. 1. So, he might possibly make a deal. But I think the Chinese are not counting on it. The Chinese must get ready for a more aggressive president. But again, having said that, the only thing you must know about Donald Trump is that he can do anything. Because when Donald Trump wakes up, he cannot predict what he's going to do for the rest of the day. He might change his mind in the rest of the day.

*Thank you, professor. Before we conclude, professor, you have one minute only for some final thoughts or insights.*

In one minute, I can promise you that you will not be bought in the next ten years. The US-China

contest will accelerate. Get ready, you'll watch the greatest show in human history.

Good, to know that. At the end of this truly compelling and very informative session, we would like to thank you, Professor, for offering these insightful and unique perspectives on this vital topic, the prospects of the US-China relations following the 2024 elections. And we also thank you, our esteemed audience for your parti-

cipation and we look forward to welcoming you all again in our next discussions and lectures. Thank you.

Sources: <https://seektruthfromfacts.org/guess-submissions/kishore-mahbubanis-ear-searing-speech-on-the-usas-desperate-struggles-to-crush-china-in-english-with-english-chinese-subtitles/>

*(Transcript and translation "Swiss Standpoint"/ Ursula Cross)*