

**Tiltshift Summit**

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Keynote Speech

by

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1 We live at an unique moment in history. I will share with you my thoughts on three of the historic shifts which are taking place.

2 The first historic shift is geo-strategic. The power balance of the world is undergoing a fundamental change. After more than two centuries of decline and stagnation, Asia is on the rise again. In his interesting book, "When Asia Was The World", the historian, Stewart Gordon, states that Asia dominated the world for over a millennium. He argues that from the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE to the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE, all the centres of civilisation were in Asia. However, except for Japan, the rest of Asia failed to embrace the Industrial Revolution and gradually fell behind.

3 Asia has awakened from a long slumber. Led by China and India, the two most populous states of the world, Asia is growing by leaps and bounds. It is today the most economically dynamic region of the world. It has survived the Euro-American Financial Crisis of

2008-2009 with relatively little damage and has returned to its trajectory of high growth. In another 10 to 20 years, China could surpass the US as the world's largest economy and India could become no. 3. My good friend, Kishore Mahbubani, the Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, has written a thought-provoking book on this shift, entitled "The New Asian Hemisphere: the Irresistible Rise of the East".

4 I want to share a concern with you. My concern is whether Asia's rise will be peaceful. My concern is whether the West, especially the United States, will accept Asia's rise or seek to contain it. Historically, changes in the balance of power have not always been peaceful. It is quite normal for an incumbent power to seek to contain the rise of other powers which are capable of challenging its pole position. I hope that the relationship between the US, the incumbent power, and China, the rising power, will remain peaceful and cooperative. The two countries share more convergent than divergent interests. It is, therefore, rational for them to cooperate where their interests coincide and to compete where they do not. It is not rational for them to view each other as adversaries. We must, however, never under-estimate man's capacity for irrational behaviour. History is replete with such examples. My appeal to the young leaders of America and China is to help build trust and friendship between the young peoples of the two countries. I hope the student leaders who are here from Beijing and New York will respond positively to this appeal.

5        Second, I want to share with you my concerns with some of the contradictions of our world. Let me give you a few examples. The world has never been so globalised, inter-connected and inter-dependent. At the same time, the public sentiment in the US and Europe is growing increasingly protectionist and anti-globalisation. This is surprising and sad because Europe and America are the two largest beneficiaries of free trade and globalisation. Free trade and globalisation have benefitted all countries. In particular, they have enabled the developing countries to lift themselves out of poverty and to join and compete in the world economy. My appeal to all of you, but especially to the student leaders who are here from Europe and America, is to resist the forces of protectionism and economic autarchy. I understand, of course, that neither Europe nor America has fully recovered from their financial crises. Faced with weak growth, high unemployment and huge debts, the instinct is to turn inwards. The WTO will publish a report later this month warning that protectionism is surging in the wake of the global (sic) financial crisis. This has gotten worse in the last six months. History has, however, shown that protectionism is a dead end road. I appeal to our student leaders from Europe and America to resist the temptation of protectionism and to stand firm in their support for free trade and globalisation.

6        There is another major contradiction I want to highlight. The world has never been as prosperous as it is today. However, it is also a fact that the majority of the 6.5 billion citizens of our planet continue to live in poverty, do not enjoy the benefits of good governance and do not feel optimistic about their future.

7 Asia is growing in prosperity, but it is also the home of the largest population of poor people in the world. It is unacceptable that 700 million Asians do not have access to safe drinking water and 1,900 million Asians do not have access to modern sanitation. In many parts of Asia, 10 year old girls are still being sold into prostitution. Young leaders such as you should act as our conscience. You should stand up and say to your leaders that the growing social divide is unacceptable. You should hold your leaders to account for their failure to deliver good governance to their peoples. Let the jasmine revolution in Tunisia and Egypt be a warning to all the oppressive, corrupt and incompetent rulers of the world. The message is that the people of the world will no longer tolerate political oppression or accept the rule of corrupt and incompetent leaders. I hope the student leaders gathered here will unite their voices in championing the rule of law, human rights and good governance.

8 Third, I want to share with you my deep concern for the future of our planet. I chaired the negotiations at the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro, in June 1992. At that Summit, we adopted two treaties: the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Nineteen years have passed since the Earth Summit. Is the earth in better health today than it was 19 years or 50 years ago? The answer is regrettably no.

9 During the past 50 years, our actions have resulted in the loss of roughly one-fifth of the earth's topsoil, one-fifth of the land suitable for agriculture, 90 per cent of our large commercial fisheries and one-third of our forests. At the same time, our population has

increased from 2.5 billion to 6.5 billion. As a result, we have reason to worry about our water, food and energy security.

10 We have extinguished so much of the earth's biological diversity and so rapidly, that the earth's ecosystems are under threat. Why should we care? There are many people who have said that we need not care and that the extinction of other species of mammals, fish, insect, etc, will not impact human lives. Those who hold this view do not know that in the web of life, the humble bee, for example, plays an indispensable role in horticulture and agriculture. The former Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, said we should care because:

“human health depends, to a larger extent than we might imagine, on the health of other species and on the healthy functioning of other ecosystems”.

11 There is another problem. As a result of our insatiable appetite for energy, largely produced by the burning of fossil fuels, we are in grave danger of bringing about an irreversible change in the earth's temperature. If our activities lead to an increase of the earth's temperature by more than 2°C, this will have disastrous consequences for many human communities. Some low-lying countries, such as the Maldives, will disappear. In another country, Bangladesh, millions of people will have to migrate to higher ground in order to survive. This will create a new phenomenon for the world: environmental refugees. It is, therefore, not wrong for the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Dr Kurt Campbell, to describe climate

change as the greatest security threat we face. The tragedy is that there are many, otherwise well-informed citizens in the world, who are in a state of denial. They refuse to accept science and empirical evidence and, seduced by vested interests and right-wing demagogues, believe that global warming is a science fiction.

12 What can the young leaders of the world do to reverse these trends? You are not powerless. You can champion tree-planting, energy efficiency, anti-littering, the recycling of waste, the labelling of environmentally-friendly products and services, and encourage your schools to give preference to such products and services in their procurement practices and you can shine the spotlight on companies which are hostile to the environment or which do not respect the rights of workers, women and children, and to discourage the consumers from patronising their products and services. I hope that during your week in Singapore, each of you will have the opportunity to think more deeply and creatively on what you and your schools can do. But, always remember what Mahatma Gandhi said. The change starts with you. The Chinese sage, Confucius, said something similar. He said that the quest for good governance starts with you, with what he calls “self-cultivation”.

### Conclusion

13 You, the young leaders of 20 of the leading schools of the world, represent our future. I thank you for accepting RI’s invitation to participate in this inaugural summit. I also thank you for having devoted time and thought to developing a project for each participating

school. We live in a world which is full of opportunities and possibilities. It is also a world which is full of challenges and dangers. When faced with darkness, Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "it is better to light a candle than to curse the dark". I consider your 20 projects as 20 candles. They give light and they could inspire others to light their candles. Together, we can make this a brighter and a better world.

14 Thank you.

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