

The 2005 Asian Leadership Conference in Seoul:

"The World's Problems Cannot Be Solved By the United States Alone"

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad railed against the rich and powerful countries of the world and their control over the fates of poor countries. In his opening remarks at the 2005 Asian Leadership Conference (ALC), organized by the Chosun Ilbo on March 3, at COEX in Seoul, Mahathir complained caustically, "They rule the world, but the world has no say in their elections."

In reply, Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford from 1973 to 1977, pointed out that globalization is not the result of "some master plan" and took issue with Mahathir's characterization of the plight of poor countries. "International problems cannot be categorized as weak versus strong," said Kissinger.

Kissinger defended the United States by arguing that the world's problems cannot be solved by the U.S. alone, while pointing to the success of countries like Korea for taking responsibility for their own economic well-being and rebuilding from the rubble left after the Korean War.

He sees the stalled Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear standoff resuming soon "because there are no alternatives" to resolving the tensions on the peninsula. He stressed the agreement between world leaders to stop nuclear proliferation, by saying, "The world must control this nuclear weapons proliferation, as it could lead to an unimaginable situation."

He said that a nuclear North Korea could be tempted to proliferate nuclear weapons and technology to other countries, although he was hopeful international efforts to persuade Pyongyang to give up its nuclear programs and receive security guarantees and economic assistance will be successful. "It is an unavoidable negotiation to continue. The negotiation will resume soon because there are no alternatives," he said.

Kissinger was the main U.S. negotiator in the Vietnam peace talks and in establishing diplomatic ties with China. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 for negotiating the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.

U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill, who also joined the first day of a two-day forum, called

on North Korea to return to Six-Party Talks, assuring Pyongyang that it will not be invaded by the United States. Hill has been named head of the American nuclear negotiating team. Thomas Hubbard, a former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, echoed Hill's position, saying that Pyongyang could get what it wants through the discussion.

At the ALC as calling "the blue ribbon panel of world leaders," well-known political personalities called for increased regional cooperation to address security issues and responses to disasters such as the earthquake-tsunami in Southeast Asia. Among other world leaders (about 60 figures) at the conference were former Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri; former New Zealander Prime Minister Jim Bolger; former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone.

Strikingly absent from the discussion were calls for more aid. Instead, leaders focused on the more forward-looking themes of tsunami education and regional cooperation. Mahathir spoke eloquently for greater awareness and understanding of how tsunamis work by the general population. He alluded to the fact that many victims were caught wholly unaware when the sea receded just before the big wave hit.

In the ALC second session on the issue of the December 26 tsunami, Megawati outlined the terrible devastation suffered by her country, where the latest estimates of the disaster put the number of dead at 95,000 and the number of missing and presumed dead at 133,000.

At least in terms of the conference topics, it was this nugget from the former Malaysian Prime Minister on the importance of capable political leadership: "Leaders can destroy nations as much as they can build them." In his luncheon speech on March 4, Mahathir Mohammad said, "A nation's leader must have a longer term to see accomplishments. If it is too short, it is impossible for the leader to prove his capability."

"Even the most brilliant plan will benefit no one if it is not carried out," said Mahathir. He also urged closer and friendlier cooperation among the ruling and opposition parties. "Minority parties must also respect the government of the majority," he said, adding legislators should stop fighting and filibustering.

Mahathir's point is simple: First, give your leader a chance to achieve his goals. Nothing moves quickly in politics, not even in Korea. Some initiatives take time to nurture and grow before they bear fruit. Second, trust the electorate. If the leader screws up, it should be the voters who kick him out, not the clock.

Then Mahathir strayed into some controversial territory. He praised democracy but noted that it isn't perfect. He talked about the difficulties of choosing competent leaders in democratic

settings and also about the need to give them the tools to make the tough decisions that aren't popular, or that seem undemocratic.

He stooped a little at this point by not resisting the urge to sideswipe the American electorate for reinstalling George W. Bush to a second term. But his canvass was much wider than that. His point: voters everywhere are often ignorant of the big problems facing their respective countries, or the relative value of the leadership alternatives from which they have to choose. That ignorance is preyed upon by a pliant media which often joins gleefully in the misinformation campaign.