

**IPS-Nathan Lectures:
Bilahari Kausikan on “Can Singapore Cope?”**

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At his fifth and final 2015/16 IPS-Nathan Lecture, Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan spoke at length about the extent to which Singapore could cope in a post-Cold War environment. More than 300 people attended his lecture at the NUS Kent Ridge Guild House, which was moderated by IPS Director Janadas Devan.

The Reality of Small States

Ambassador Kausikan pointed out the realities that small states face compared to bigger countries. Small states are vulnerable and the margin for error is narrow, he said. He highlighted the political dysfunctions of the US, the traumas that countries like China and Russia have endured, as well as how Belgium went without a government for almost 20 months, saying these were episodes that small countries would not have survived. Pointing to what he called a more insidious threat, Ambassador Kausikan warned of the danger of Singapore’s autonomy being compromised, even if it remained a formally sovereign and

independent country. He said that this precarious state was the case for many small states, even as members of the United Nations.

On Southeast Asia, Ambassador Kausikan said that countries in the region have organised themselves on the basis of the dominance of one ethnic group over others. Singapore, on the other hand, is organised on the basis of a multiracial meritocracy. This makes the country an anomaly in Southeast Asia, and anomalies only remain relevant and prosper so long as they are extraordinarily successful, he said. This has added to complexities in Singapore’s dealings with its immediate neighbours who harbour ambitions of surpassing it. Singapore’s approach has thus been about “maintaining an omni-directional balance in Southeast Asia by facilitating the engagement of all major powers in our region, while fostering regional cooperation through ASEAN; maintaining our economic edge and keeping our powder dry,” he said, adding that it is a “delicate balancing act”.

Policy and the Role of the Civil Service

Traditionally, the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of every country was to be the principal interlocutor of the country with the rest of the world. However, such a concept was outdated, said Ambassador Kausikan, as issues are no longer neatly separated by strict bureaucratic boundaries. “There is no important policy domain that is only domestic,” he said, adding that it is only the extent to which an issue is an international one. Despite observing the trend towards a “Whole of Government” approach in Singapore, Ambassador Kausikan said his impression was that agencies left to their own devices often gravitated towards operating in institutional silos, which could have the negative effect of making the civil service risk-averse. He cited two examples, one of which was when the MFA had in 2011 assessed that it was to Singapore’s benefit to become an Observer in the Arctic Council. Global warming, which could alter sea routes, could have potentially profound implications for Singapore, and it was concluded that it would be prudent to have early warning of developments in the Arctic. However, the criteria for Observership spanned several agencies, and the response from the agencies was “lukewarm”, he said. Only after headway was made through the efforts of MFA did other agencies come on board.

Ambassador Kausikan next turned his attention to the Administrative Service, which sits at the apex of Singapore’s civil service. The Administrative Service, he said, is based on the idea that public service leaders should be generalists rather than specialists, and who can equally capably across different domains. This is based on the assumption that there is only a certain logic that is valid across all domains, he said. He observed that most senior appointments in the Ministries and Statutory Boards were Administrative Officers, rather than officers from specialist services, adding that it was his view “that very few people can be equally good at everything.” “I for example, would have been utterly useless in any other Ministry than MFA,” he said to laughter from the audience. He noted the 2013 programme that enabled members of specialist services to be appointed to senior positions previously reserved for members of the Administrative Service. Ambassador Kausikan, however, was unclear if it meant that individuals would be allowed to remain in their own services and not join the Administrative Service in order to take up such positions; or, if they were allowed to do so, be remunerated equal to Administrative Service officers with similar appointments. “Unless this is so, a caste may be perpetuated,” he warned.



Ambassador Kausikan addressed the notion that the civil service must be politically neutral. Calling this a myth, he said that such a civil service was to be found “nowhere on earth”. “This is for the simple reason that the civil service is always and everywhere the instrument of the government in power,” he said. Giving politicians objective advice is not the same as being politically neutral, he said, as the civil service is still compelled to carry out the instructions of politicians, irrespective of whether or not their advice is taken.

Social Cohesion

Ambassador Kausikan highlighted the “culture wars” in Singapore today, with groups lobbying for the removal of the death penalty and equal rights for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) individuals. While he shared some, but not all of these views, he believed that the majority of Singaporeans were conservative. There were also groups that believed in fundamentalist versions of Islam and Christianity, which should also not be ignored, no matter what one might privately think of them, he said.

Dealing with China’s changing calculations of interest in Southeast Asia — and its relationship with overseas Chinese communities — poses a more intricate challenge, he said, highlighting President Xi Jinping’s speech at the Seventh Conference for Friendship of Overseas Chinese Associations in 2014 as an example of this. In the speech, President Xi, while calling on overseas Chinese to “better integrate themselves into their local communities”, had also spoken about “members of the Chinese family” as having a “shared dream”, and to “never forget... the blood of the Chinese nation flowing in their veins”. China has previously thought of Singapore as a “Chinese country” that should understand China and ought to explain China to other ASEAN countries, he said. There is the danger that if Singapore accepts the characterisation of Singapore as a “Chinese country”, it would

provoke a counter-reaction from other major powers and could threaten our multiracial compact of social cohesion, he said.

Question and Answer Session

The first question was on the Philippines President-elect Rodrigo Duterte: “What does that mean for ASEAN and Singapore?” Ambassador Kausikan described Mr Duterte as an outlier, and that it was difficult to assess what was campaign rhetoric and what could be firm policy direction. “But it does seem that he may be willing to take a somewhat different approach towards the South China Sea issue. I don’t think he will give up the Philippines’ claims but he may take a different approach vis-à-vis China on the South China Sea claims as he had hinted so”, Ambassador Kausikan added.

Another member asked about the impact of climate change and the post-antibiotics environment. Ambassador Kausikan referenced [a point he made in his first lecture](#), that international action on such issues would be at best “sub-optimal” in the post-Cold War environment, as there remained no longer a strategic imperative for countries to follow US leadership, except on an ad-hoc basis. While acknowledging the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference as one where general consensus was established, he also pointed to how many felt that “this was the best there could be, but it was not good enough.” “Even if everybody does everything they said they would do, it would only slightly slow global warming and not really deal with the substance of the issue. I would guess the same would be true of antibiotics and nuclear proliferation and all kinds of transnational global issues that you care to name,” he said.



A member of the audience asked how Ambassador Kausikan could reconcile asking civil servants to avoid institutional silos while on the other hand remaining critical of the

Administrative Service’s approach to grooming generalists who were exposed to different portfolios. Ambassador Kausikan said that there was indeed that tension but clarified that what he meant was that while he agreed that the civil service needed both generalists and specialists, it should get rid of the assumption that only one type of logic was valid across all domains.

“A National Education curriculum revamped with the best of intentions is only as good as the people who deliver it,” an audience member said. “How do we convince adult teachers about this when the prevailing sentiment I see among my younger colleagues is that this is propaganda?” he asked. Ambassador Kausikan agreed and said that he had the same discussion with staff from the Education Ministry who were revising the history curriculum. He described the current conundrum as “paying the price for de-emphasising history in our national curriculum,” and that the only solution he could think of was for civil servants, military leaders and politicians to continually engage teachers so that they better understand how and why national policies are crafted, he said.

Andrew Yeo is a Research Assistant at IPS supporting the work of the S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore. Natalie Chia is a former intern who worked on the fifth IPS-Nathan Lecture.

Watch the full video of Lecture V [here](#).

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