Institute of Policy Studies

IPS-Nathan Lectures: Bilahari Kausikan on "ASEAN & US-China Competition in Southeast Asia"

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A major shipping route with significant natural reserves, the South China Sea is the site of long-running disputes between China and several Southeast Asian countries. In beginning his third IPS-Nathan Lecture titled "ASEAN & US-China Competition in Southeast Asia", Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan described the South China Sea as "the issue where the parameters of US-China competition and their interests are most clearly defined." In his hour-long speech at the National University, Ambassador Kausikan examined the historical and current factors that have shaped China's interests in the South China Sea, the resulting responses by different Southeast Asian countries, and the United States' position on the issue. A lively question-and-answer session followed the lecture, moderated by Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University.

Competition in the South China Sea

Ambassador Kausikan began by pointing out that China's borders with its neighbours have always been contested. The current US-China competition over the South China Sea is "only the most recent manifestation," he said, citing how China's border with Myanmar was not definitively demarcated until 1960; its land borders with Laos and Vietnam not until 1991 and 1999, respectively; and the trijunction between Laos, China and Vietnam not until 2006.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 as a reaction to the external threats of communism and the Cold War. It ensured stability, said Ambassador Kausikan, as ASEAN leaders realised that "whatever our other differences, and they were great, we realised if we did not hang together we would hang separately." Still, the differences between ASEAN countries were and remain profound, he said, going beyond their political systems or levels of economic development to the visceral differences of race, language and religion. Such differences have to be managed, and thus ASEAN can only work by consensus or risk unpredictable consequences, he said. Ambassador Kausikan underscored how consensus worked in ASEAN's context by adding that the "basic consensus on

which ASEAN rests is a consensus on always having a consensus: even if it is only a consensus on goals that we know full well cannot be realised or can only be partially realised."

He described ASEAN's strengths and weaknesses as "two sides of a single coin". Decision-making by consensus was what allowed ASEAN to survive, and there was clarity with regard to how the original five non-communist ASEAN members would position themselves within the Cold War structure. At the time, China was also a de facto member of the US-led anti-Soviet alliance and stood with ASEAN against the Soviet-backed Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. However, since the end of the Cold War and the expansion of ASEAN to include all 10 Southeast Asian states, arriving at consensus has been markedly more complicated, Ambassador Kausikan observed. An example of this is the failure of the 45th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2012 to issue a Joint Statement, due to the Cambodian Chair's refusal to bring up issues on the South China Sea that might affect their relations with China, he recalled.

Framing China's actions in the South China Sea, he repeated his point in the previous lecture that China was not looking to escalate the situation into a war. Its recent manoeuvres of placing military assets on artificial islands were, militarily, a non-factor; in the event of a war, such assets would be "vaporised within minutes". On the part of the US, he noted that it has only emphasised its alliance with Japan on the disputed islands in the East China Sea — this did not apply to its

alliance with the Philippines and disputed territories in the South China Sea. However, Ambassador Kausikan warned that if a US navy vessel were sunk by China, the US would certainly retaliate. Any direct attacks on US navy vessels are unlikely, however, as it would confront China with the uncomfortable choice of following through with war — which they would likely lose — or backing down at the threat of war, weakening the legitimacy of the China Communist Party either way. "War in support of America's principal East Asian ally, Japan, is credible even if unlikely; war over tiny islands, reefs and atolls would be absurd," Ambassador Kausikan said.

Ambassador Kausikan, however, noted that American and Chinese interests in the South China Sea were not symmetrical, saying that it is more important to China than the US. Although China has denied that the South China Sea is a core interest, he took the view that it is linked to the legitimacy of the China Communist Party, and that the denial was made so as not to unduly worry other South East Asian states. The US, on the other hand, defines its interests in the South China Sea based on upholding international law and Freedom of Navigation. "These are important interests but not on the same level as the basic underlying Chinese interest," he said.

Question and Answer Session

"What happens if the US presidential candidates is either Bernie [Sanders], or [Donald] Trump, and they are in favour of a rebalancing away from Asia?" the first

audience member asked. Ambassador Kausikan began by reminding the audience that since he began his time in the Foreign Service, "there has been a basic continuity in US policy" in East Asia. Trump and Sanders, he observed, tap on the same body politic — citizens who are tired and distrustful of free trade and globalisation, and uncertain of their own future. Trump, while saying that he is not isolationist, has indicated that he will take a far more transactional approach to Korea and Japan, he said. On Trump being President, Ambassador Kausikan quipped, to laughter from the crowd: "Well, if that comes to pass, I don't know man, where can I emigrate to?" He went on to say that the Republican Party was in a quandary over Trump. The party could have a brokered convention and risk a grassroots rebellion, or a normal convention and end up having to endorse Trump as their candidate, he said.

A student majoring in International Relations asked about Rohingya refugees — Muslims who live mostly in Myanmar's Rakhine state. They have been denied citizenship and lack access to basic health, education and other services, leading them to seek refuge in other countries. "What is ASEAN's stance on this?" he asked, citing the R2P (Responsibility to Protect), a principle endorsed by member states of the United Nations, which could include the right to intervene on humanitarian grounds. Ambassador Kausikan gave a candid response. R2P, he said, "is one of those concepts that sounds very good but does not work very well in practice, having been deployed only against very weak and insignificant countries." While he agreed that the Rohingya issue was an area of grave concern, his belief was that ASEAN would not want to take responsibility for it because of the lack of a solution. Quoting Mr Lee Kuan Yew, he said that "sometimes you have to grow calluses on your heart, if not you will bleed to death". To the student, he said that a lesson he'd learnt from international relations was this: "Just because a problem exists doesn't mean that there will be a solution."

An A-Level student asked about Singapore and Thailand's role in ASEAN discussions on the Cambodian crisis in the 1980s and how ASEAN faced difficulties coming to a consensus due to the "hard-line stance" of both countries. Ambassador Kausikan explained that it was never in ASEAN's power to solve the Cambodian crisis. "The Cambodian crisis was essentially a Sino-Soviet proxy fight," he said. A solution only came about later, when the Soviet Union began retracting their reach in the region to concentrate on internal reform under Mikhail Gorbachev, he said. "This was a big-power game and preventing a fait accompli is an ASEAN game, because ASEAN as small countries can lobby much more effectively in the United Nations, in a non-aligned movement, than big countries," he emphasised. This however, gave ASEAN legitimacy because "what we could do, we did very well, which was to jam the Vietnamese at every corner when they tried to break out of diplomatic isolation," he said. "We even posted diplomats at toilet doors, you know?" he said. At this, Ambassador Ong chimed in, to much laughter from the audience, saying that one of

his roles during his time in the Foreign Service was to be at the toilet in the UN to ensure that even if other ASEAN diplomats had to use the toilet, they would come out in time to vote against Vietnam.

Next, Ambassador Kausikan was asked about India's interests in the South China Sea. He reiterated points he had made in the previous lecture — that India, though a big power, was a "huge complicated country" whose strategic energy was going to be directed inwards, or westwards towards Pakistan and Afghanistan. While it had a limited role to play with regard to the South China Sea, India is potentially a major player on land if it helps with infrastructure development. A much-talked about Indian plan to build a road from the eastern part of India, eastwards across Myanmar, was a good one, but it had yet to come to fruition, he said.

Asked about Australia's role in ASEAN, Ambassador Kausikan said Australia was "one of ASEAN's most important partners in this region", playing a major role in economics and capacity building, among other things. He added that Australia was Singapore's "substantive dialogue partner" and we should continue thinking about how to deepen relationships with it and other similar dialogue partners.

Andrew Yeo is a Research Assistant at IPS supporting the work of the S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore. Watch the full video of Lecture III here. Sign up for Lecture IV on 29 April 2016 here.

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