

Launch of “Dealing With an Ambiguous World”

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On 18 October 2016, IPS launched [*Dealing with an Ambiguous World*](#) at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The book is an edited compilation of the five [IPS-Nathan Lectures](#) that Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan gave between January and May 2016, as IPS’ 2015/16 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. The title also includes excerpts of the question-and-answer sessions after each lecture. Ambassador Kausikan was the second S R Nathan Fellow, after SMU Chairman Ho Kwon Ping, who was the 2014/15 S R Nathan Fellow.



The book launch was a collegial affair, with around 90 guests, including current and former MFA officers, students, National Servicemen and professionals from the private sector.

A diplomat for over three decades, Ambassador Kausikan’s book covers the international landscape in the post-Cold War era; US-China relations; ASEAN’s attempts to maintain order in the region; the role of human rights in international relations; and what he thinks Singapore must do to cope with these complexities. Reflecting on the process of crafting and delivering the lectures, Ambassador

Kausikan said he had initially felt “aggrieved” at having to put together the lecture series. But in retrospect, he said, the process made him “crystallise and organise what would have otherwise remained random musings in various bars around the world.”

He also took the opportunity to [emphasise two points](#). First, he stressed that as Singapore navigates an increasingly uncertain global environment, it is important to stay alert to the possibility of external attempts at influence that may undermine our own sovereignty. Ambassador Kausikan referred to the recent “noisy kerfuffle” between the Chinese state-owned newspaper *Global Times* and Singapore’s Ambassador in Beijing on the South China Sea disputes. This, Ambassador Kausikan said, was an example of how bigger nations might expect Singapore to subordinate our national interests to theirs on the basis of size.

Next, Ambassador Kausikan touched on a global phenomenon that is emerging as a feature of the post-Cold War World: the rise of anti-globalisation and xenophobic sentiments by those who have not benefited from globalisation, and the growth of nationalism in response. He cited the rise of Donald Trump, the election of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte and Britain’s exit from the European Union as manifestations of this trend. Would Singapore be spared from this trend? Ambassador Kausikan said that all Singaporeans would have to work hard to maintain the current state of affairs, where anti-foreigner sentiment, though troubling, is still manageable, where the Singapore system works and the majority of people have faith in the government.



The consequences of current geopolitical shifts was also [a theme of the quest of honour Wong Kan Seng’s speech](#). Mr Wong, Chairman of Ascendas-Singbridge Pte Ltd and a former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs observed that foreign policy imperatives are changing as governments respond to domestic

political headwinds, fuelled by the impact of globalisation, changing demographics and income disparities.

The fraught US presidential election campaign and Brexit have caused deep uncertainties, said Mr Wong, as the world is so inter-connected today. In contrast, when Singapore left Malaysia 51 years ago, “there was hardly a whimper except for the anxieties of Singaporeans because we were small, poor and therefore irrelevant to the rest of the world. Now, after 50 years of achievements, others take our views a little more seriously.”

Touching on China-Singapore relations, he stressed that both sides should not lose sight of their strategic relationship that had been forged over many years, and which went beyond the “one single issue of the South China Sea”. Singapore wants to be friends to all states, large and small, and will not subordinate its own national interests to larger countries, he said. Mr Wong also urged Singaporeans to develop a cast of mind to understand and assess the implications of global changes and challenges. “There must be a consensus on the fundamentals of our national interest, in order to preserve our real sovereign status. As a multicultural society, we will need to decide how to internally prepare ourselves, and as a nation, how to externally position ourselves, both with our regional partners and within the wider region, to meet such an unpredictable future.”

Special tribute was paid at the launch to the late Mr S R Nathan, the sixth and longest-serving President of Singapore, who passed away in August this year. IPS Director Janadas Devan said the S R Nathan Fellowship was established in 2013 “to pay tribute to a man whose services to Singapore were exceptional.” Agreeing, Ambassador Kausikan said he owed “a lot” to the late Mr Nathan. “He was my first boss and to some of us in MFA, he will forever be The Boss. I hope these lectures have, at least in some measure, done justice to his memory.”



The launch ended with a book signing session by Ambassador Kausikan. Following their [coverage of the book](#), online site Mothership.sg asked readers to “highlight one redeeming quality about Ambassador Kausikan” in order to win a copy of the book. Due to the popular response, IPS provided 10 books to be given away, where one respondent wrote a poem and a “listicle” about the Ambassador.

On 5 November, a Meet-the-Author session was held at Books Kinokuniya with an audience of around 50 people, concluding a memorable run of having Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan as the second S R Nathan Fellow. To date, around 1,700 copies of the book have been sold.

Dealing with an Ambiguous World retails at \$24 (softcover) and \$50 (hardcover) and is available at all leading bookstores. [Fern Yu](#) is a Research Assistant (Special Projects) at IPS. She contributes to the work of the S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

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