Institute of Policy Studies

Defining Bilahari Kausikan

By Andrew Yeo
IPS Research Assistant

Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan is the Institute of Policy Studies' 2015/16 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. A diplomat for some three decades, he was ambassador to Russia, and Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York. He retired in 2013 and is now Ambassador-at-Large and Policy Adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Ambassador Kausikan is well-known for his keen insights on international affairs, contributing his candid views to the media as well as sharing them on his public Facebook page, where he has over 2,000 followers.

From this month to June, Ambassador Kausikan will deliver a series of five IPS-Nathan Lectures, collectively titled "*Dealing with an Ambiguous World*". Ahead of his first lecture, "*Defining the Problem*", on 29 January, he responded to six questions that IPS posed to him, to give our newsletter readers some insight into the man.

Can you describe three key life experiences that have made you who you are today?

I always find such questions somewhat strange. The most important life experience for everybody must obviously be having been born since we are who we are largely – though of course not wholly — by virtue of what we inherit from our parents. In any case my most formative experiences were with my family.

I was just old enough to have been dimly conscious of events on 9 August 1965. My father was in broadcasting at that time and called back to ask me to turn on the TV and watch the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's famous press interview when he broke down and cried. I don't pretend to have understood the politics that led to Separation at that time, but I do remember a hollow feeling of indefinable foreboding. Up to that time the curfews that were imposed when racial riots broke out were just unexpected holidays from school.

Then, my father was one of those enlisted as an Ambassador in our hastily cobbled together foreign service. He was serving in Indonesia when our Embassy was sacked by a mob. I saw the aftermath of that and it was perhaps my first lesson in the realities of diplomacy and the nature of our neighbourhood. I am also probably the last generation of Singaporeans who can remember a poor, dirty, disorderly Singapore and so have a context to appreciate how far we have come. This perspective is far more valuable than those who do not share it can imagine.

I had never intended to join the civil service. I once wanted to be an academic and in fact got a scholarship from the then-University of Singapore to do a PhD in international relations at Columbia University. I had passed my qualifying examinations and was in the process of writing my dissertation when struck by an epiphany: the academic study of international relations is largely nonsense so why waste time? I quit and returned home. In retrospect, it was a close shave both for me and the university.

There was still the small matter of my bond of eight years, which I had no money to pay, and in any case had no intention of breaking. After some haggling and threats, the Public Service Commission finally agreed to let me serve in MFA, which I chose because it was the only part of the government I thought I knew anything about. I never intended to stay beyond the period of my bond, but I forgot to leave because I was having fun doing something that was at least of marginal use to the country. So I stayed.

For my generation of Foreign Service Officers, the most important experiences were during the decade-long diplomatic struggle to prevent the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia from being accepted as a *fait accompli*. We learnt our trade then by doing in a sink-or-swim process of trial and error and learnt also that diplomacy is not just about being nice or agreeable. It is about protecting and advancing the national interest, preferably by being nice and agreeable, but if necessary by other means.

Additionally, my generation was privileged to work with the three men who shaped the fundamentals of our foreign policy: Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S Rajaratnam. Of course we worked for them in very humble capacities — as note-takers and bag carriers — but still were privileged to absorb almost by osmosis something of their values and the basic principles that guided their actions and remain relevant to our foreign policy to this day.

But that's enough on this.

Since retiring from the public sector, you've gone on to become quite a prolific commentator on international issues. Why?

I would not call myself prolific — I am a world-class procrastinator and find writing painful, particularly the first sentence. But I have always been irritated by the poor quality of public commentary on international affairs in Singapore. Too many local commentators start from premises, often unstated or unconscious, that are irrelevant to our situation or naive. Yet Singapore cannot insulate itself from international developments and Singaporeans need to understand the realities that we cannot avoid.

To live in a state of happy delusion is dangerous. It seems to me that too many of our commentators on international affairs are afraid to state the obvious for fear of being considered shallow or else they tend to paint an entirely unrealistic picture of things because they want to be considered nice guys. Small states have limited options which usually are obvious. Yet the obvious is sometimes not so obvious because obfuscation and wishful thinking are unfortunately all too often characteristics of discussions on international affairs. And the obvious options are not necessarily nice. So I occasionally rouse myself from my customary state of torpor to state what is obvious or unpleasant but necessary. With what effect I do not know – probably not very much — but it at least makes me feel better.

Which three events in Singapore's history do you feel all Singaporeans should remember by heart?

Merger and Separation and the events leading up to and surrounding them; the attempts in the late 1980s by some individuals and organisations in the US to interfere in our domestic politics; and the row we had with Malaysia over water and other issues in the 1990s.

What can readers expect from your series of IPS-Nathan Lectures?

I think the world is entering a phase of more than usual uncertainty. I will try to explain why I think this is so and then examine some specific aspects, such as US-China relations, ASEAN and Southeast Asia and conclude the last lecture by considering how prepared we are for these developments.

You've been both widely panned and praised for some of your statements - tell us what goes through your mind and the considerations you make as you pen your thoughts.

I have long ceased to care very much about what people other than my family and friends think about me. So when I write I only think about what I want to say and how to get it across as clearly as possible.

You shared several tributes to the late David Bowie on Facebook and also articulated your disdain for the British band Oasis. So who's your favorite musician, your true Starman, and why the appeal?

Deep Purple. I am of the view — perhaps “prejudice” is a more accurate term — that with very, very few exceptions, most popular music after circa 1978 is not worth listening to. But then I have been accused, probably accurately, of being tone deaf so what do I know?

Andrew Yeo supports the work of the S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. More information on the S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore is available here.

*****

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.enews@nus.edu.sg

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy
National University of Singapore