

SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, CHAIRMAN, ASCENDAS-SINGBRIDGE PTE LTD

1. Good evening to all of you. I am happy to be here at the launch of “Dealing with an Ambiguous World” by Bilahari.
2. When Bilahari asked me in July if I could say a few words at the launch the publication, I accepted without hesitation. How could I say “no”. Bilahari has never rejected any favour I asked of him. I have known him for almost 30 years, since 1987 when I became Second Minister for Foreign Affairs. We worked closely together when I took over from Mr Dhanabalan as Foreign Minister in 1988 till 1994. Bilahari has a sharp mind and is not afraid to articulate his views with an equally sharp tongue. Sometimes, those who were called up by him might feel uncomfortable. I heard that even ambassadors were not spared his oratorical skills, when he had cause to state his case forcefully. When I was a minister, I always preferred the officials to speak their minds than for them to second guess mine. Bilahari was one of those whose counsel I would take very seriously.
3. One of the most important issues to Singapore in the 1980s was Cambodia. After a period of conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and purged the Khmer Rouge government. For all the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam's actions amounted to aggression on the basis of Cambodia's internal developments, and had to be contested by Singapore and ASEAN as a matter of principle. The dynamics of the Cambodia issue was not trivial, within ASEAN and in relation to Sino-Soviet conflict and the broader Cold War narrative. We had to navigate the various major powers, and lobby the broader international community. This was a new ball game to Singapore. As Bilahari put it, "for a small country, foreign policy is always very largely a series of improvisations". This was especially so for us in the Cambodia issue, where MFA officers who could think on their feet made a lot of the difference.
4. Bilahari was very much involved in working on this issue in the first 10 years of his long and distinguished MFA career – 33, not 31 years. He proved to be a key asset in the Singapore team handling the Cambodia issue. Despite his youth then, his ability to think strategically and on broad basis was already clear. But beyond the intellectual that all of us know Bilahari to be, he was also a skillful operator. He went to the trenches to secure crucial intelligence. He would fraternize with different groups, sniff out their opinions and get valuable information for us to chart our course. Over the more than three decades of his career, Bilahari rose through the ranks to reach the apex of the Foreign Service. He has been instrumental in formulating Singapore's foreign policy, in responding to many foreign policy challenges, in building up our diplomatic capabilities, and in safeguarding our national interests.
5. Earlier this year, Bilhari delivered five IPS-Nathan lectures with the main theme “Dealing with an Ambiguous World”. The lecture theme was most appropriate. We are indeed living in a much more complex world, more amorphous than during the Cold War when at least countries were aligned with the US-led West, or the USSR/Socialist/Communist bloc, Non-Aligned or claimed to be non-aligned. Bilahari's lectures covered the changes in the external environment, the strategic challenges that Singapore will face as a result and how prepared we are to meet

them. Among other things, Bilahari examined the evolving nature of the US-China relationship, the broad underlying factors in the South China Sea disputes and what this means to ASEAN, and how ideas of human rights and democracy have played out in international relations. The lectures and the Q&A dialogues were a tour de force, of the complexities of international relations and Singapore's foreign policy fundamentals.

6. I always found it intellectually invigorating to read Bilahari's articles. On reading his 4th lecture on "The Myth of Universality: The Geopolitics of Human Rights", I recalled the speech I made at the World Conference on Human Rights organized by the United Nations in Vienna in Jun 1993. No prize for guessing correctly who put up that draft. When Henry Kissinger called on me at the MFA office a few months after the conference, he commented to me that Singapore spoke for many at the UN Conference, that the West could not apply its yardstick on human rights to all countries as there is no universally accepted yardstick. Not even till this day. Kissinger supported what Singapore said. I did not know how Kissinger got wind of the speech.

7. An important idea that Bilahari weaved throughout his lectures is the candid understanding that increasingly, foreign policy is driven by domestic politics. In the modern, functioning states, political leadership gives expression to the will of their people. Governments come to power with the support of their people. If they diverge from the people's mandate, they lose their legitimacy to lead. We are living in a time where the grounds in major countries are shifting from the impact of globalization, changing demographics and income disparities. As governments respond to, or change in response to the domestic politics, so will their foreign policy imperatives. We see this playing out today. I think Bilahari has sketched this out in a much more comprehensive way than me. The state of the political campaigns in the US, and some of the intriguing comments about US foreign policy that emerge from the debates, introduces deep uncertainties to the world. Despite the herculean efforts of the European governments to hold together the utopian ideal of a European Union that transcended nationalism, Brexit happened. There is so much angst and uncertainty after Brexit as the world today is so inter-connected. When Singapore was out of 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.

8. Closer to home, the geopolitics surrounding the South China Sea have real consequences on Singapore and ASEAN. We are not a claimant state. But we have taken a principled position that there must be freedom of navigation and respect for international law on this issue. This is in our national interest as an open economy which depends on international law, on an open, unfettered access to the air and sea routes, and on a stable, peaceful region. ASEAN as a regional grouping should remain united in order to remain relevant. It should also approach this issue in unison.

9. Recently, some publications even took a very critical stand against Singapore because of our position on the South China Sea. They tried to drive a wedge between the government and Singaporeans. Many Singaporeans questioned the intentions of those irresponsible reports

in some Chinese media. They wondered if the critics have forgotten Singapore's contributions to China's development. And they hope that it does not reflect the views of the Chinese leaders. Singapore's position on the South China Sea was made known years ago and we have maintained a consistent position. We are not choosing sides. We want to be and are friends to all states, large and small but this does not mean we must subordinate our own national interests to larger countries.

10. While Singapore and China may disagree over specific issues every now and then, it is important that both parties do not lose sight of the strategic relationship that was built over many decades based on mutual interest and mutual respect. We have been willing to share our experiences with China on a wide range of issues from economic policy to human resource development. When China was transforming its economy, Singapore took an active part in its industrialization, through the Suzhou Industrial Park in 1994. When China embarked on sustainable development after years of growth which polluted its environment, Singapore proposed the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City in 2008. Now, in its current phase of development, Singapore is working with China to develop the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative which we undertook at the request of President Xi Jinping. Just barely a year ago, the Presidents of both countries visited each other, and agreed to upgrade our relations to an "All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times" to reflect the forward-looking and progressive nature of our ties. On that same visit, Singapore also played host to the historic Xi-Ma meeting. Singapore's relations with China are broad and deep because of our historical and cultural links. Leaders from both sides spent decades nurturing the relationship. It goes beyond one single issue of the South China Sea. But Singapore though with a majority of Chinese population is not a Chinese country. We are a multi-racial country, in a neighbourhood of non-Chinese South East Asia. In my past engagement with Chinese leaders, they repeatedly emphasized that China is not a hegemon. I take their word for it. A prosperous, stable China at ease with its neighbours is good for the region and the world. I remain hopeful that China will play a constructive role in the region, and take its rightful place as a rising power in a peaceful manner.

11. What happens in other countries impacts Singapore domestically as our economy and society are open. It is thus essential that Singaporeans develop a cast of mind, or as Bilahari has put it in the Foreword to this book, a mode of thought, to understand and assess the implications of these changes and challenges. Singaporeans must take an interest in foreign affairs and be acutely sensitive to what will affect our national interests. There must be a consensus on the fundamentals of our national interest, in order to preserve our real sovereign status. As a multi-cultural 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. The points Bilahari made about Singapore society remaining cohesive, and not letting the vulnerabilities of our success get the better of us, are worth keeping in mind.

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12. I am glad to know that there has been sustained public interest in Bilahari's lectures. Attendees included students, teachers, professionals, and diplomats. The mainstream media and online news sites also reported on Bilahari's ideas and views. With the publication of this book, I hope that more people, especially our young, will be encouraged to think about foreign affairs and learn more about our history, and engage in critical discussions on both topics, with a clear-eyed view of Singapore's fundamental interests.

13. I would also take the opportunity to appreciate IPS. IPS started the S R Nathan Fellowship in 2013 to honour the contributions by the late President S R Nathan. The Fellowship aims to contribute to public policy and governance topics in Singapore and to advance public understanding of issues of critical national interest. Bilahari was the second S R Nathan Fellow. I look forward to subsequent editions of the IPS-Nathan Lectures by future S R Nathan Fellows. The next one, I know, is Peter Ho, who I've also worked with in MFA.

14. It now gives me great pleasure to launch "Dealing with an Ambiguous World" by Bilahari Kausikan. Thank you.