

IPS-Nathan Lectures
Dealing with an Ambiguous World – Lecture IV: The Myth of Universality: The Geopolitics of
Human Rights by Bilahari Kausikan
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Lecture IV:

**The Myth of Universality: The Geopolitics of
Human Rights**

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As I stand here before you, at least three different things are happening simultaneously: what I think; what I say to convey what I think which, because of the limitations of language or by design, will not always be the same as what I think; and what you hear and understand of what I had intended to convey, which is again not necessarily the same thing. Misunderstanding of some degree is inherent in all human communication; indeed all human perception. One might call this the “Rashomon phenomenon” after the title of the short story by the Japanese author Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Human rights and democracy more than other subjects are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon. Anything really “universal” ought to be less prone to misunderstanding. In fact the evidence of our senses tells us that the most salient characteristic of the world we live in is diversity, not universality.

To explain why universality is a myth, I must beg your indulgence to recount how some of my personal experiences intersected in a minor and tangential way with international developments. Had the Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy not been so foolishly reckless as to invite me to deliver this series of lectures, I would not inflict my stories on anyone. They are of little inherent interest except, I think, to explain why I came to this conclusion and in the process draw some of the threads of my previous lectures together. My focus is on human rights and democracy promotion as an element of statecraft; in relations between states.

I served as a junior diplomat at our Embassy in Washington D.C. from 1984 to 1987. Mikhail Gorbachev had been appointed General-Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985 but the Cold War was still quite warm and the Soviet bloc seemed on the rise. The Soviet Union had invaded and occupied Afghanistan. With Moscow's support, Vietnam had invaded and occupied Cambodia. The revolutionary Sandinistas had come to power in Nicaragua. Cuban troops were fighting in Africa. That the Cold War was in fact nearing its end and that the Soviet Union would collapse only six years later, was not evident at that time, at least it was not evident to me. I had never paid much attention to human rights and democracy as factors in international relations and I do not think they played any significant role in US diplomacy during the Cold War except perhaps as a tactic. The US has of course always seen itself as the Exemplar of Rights and Democracy to the World. But during the Cold War this was more propaganda than policy. The key American foreign policy considerations were strategic. If the US had any qualms about pursuing policies that did not meet its own notions of human rights and democracy, it hid them well.

These subjects certainly did not occupy much of my time in Washington. Our major preoccupation at the Embassy was the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. There was an element of our work that obliquely touched upon human rights when we had to explain why ASEAN supported a resistance coalition that included the murderous Khmer Rouge. We did not deny that they had committed genocide. We pointed out that the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge was the most

effective fighting force in the resistance and words alone would not get the Soviet-supported Vietnamese out of Cambodia and give the Cambodia people an opportunity to determine their own future under UN-supervised elections.

It was an argument that I now admit was a little disingenuous. But in the context of the Cold War, I do not recall that we had much difficulty in getting officials of the Reagan administration to accept it. As I recounted in my last lecture, at one point the US had even sided with China and the Khmer Rouge against ASEAN. In so far as American officials were uneasy, it was about supplying non-lethal assistance to the non-communist components of the resistance. Some American officials were then still so traumatised by the Vietnam War that they imagined that supplying a few pairs of boots, some ponchos and radio-sets would again lead them down a slippery slope into another quagmire.

There was a little more difficulty with Congress which tends to be purist about human rights and democracy. But there we had the staunch support of a key member of the House of Representatives, the late Stephen Solarz, the Chairman of the House Asia-Pacific Sub-Committee. Mr Solarz was generally very liberal and I wondered why he supported us until one of his staff explained that his district had many former refugees from the Soviet-bloc. They hated the Soviet Union. Since the Soviet Union was supporting Vietnam, they were for anything that was against Vietnam. As the votes went, the Congressman followed. Mr Solarz was not atypical.

In the Philippines, the Marcos regime was under pressure after the assassination of Benigno Aquino – the current Philippine President’s father — in 1983. “People’s Power” eventually forced Marcos to flee the Philippines in 1986. Still, our main concern and the main concern of the Reagan administration, was what Marcos’ fall after 20 years in power would mean for the stability of the Philippines and Southeast Asia and not primarily as an opportunity for the promotion of democracy. In 1987, human rights was briefly forced upon my attention by the necessity of dealing with the fall-out when a group of lay Catholic social workers, returned overseas graduates and radical theatre enthusiasts were arrested under the Internal Security Act. But this was mainly to help the administration cope with pressures from NGOs and their supporters in Congress. To our friends in the administration, this was a distraction from the strategic issues of the day. We had to do our bit by running interference – to use an American football term – to help keep the administration focused.

By the end of my term in the US, events were moving more quickly and with greater significance than anyone could have foreseen. Certainly I did not. Gorbachev had introduced *glasnost*, was attempting *perestroika* and, overcoming initial scepticism, was taking important steps to improve relations with the West. In 1986, the US and the Soviet Union had reached a major understanding on nuclear arms control at the Reykjavik Summit. The same year, the Geneva Accords set a timetable for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. As the Cold War wound down, events began to break in East Asia as well. In 1987, martial law was lifted in

Taiwan; that same year, mirroring events the previous year in the Philippines, student demonstrations pushed President Chun Doo-hwan from power in South Korea. I began to sense that something was shifting in US attitudes towards human rights and democracy, but only very dimly and inchoately.

It was not until 1988, after I returned to Singapore and found myself peripherally involved in the expulsion of a US diplomat stationed in Singapore, one Hank Hendrickson, that it clearly dawned on me what had changed. Singapore had been consistent in supporting the US presence in Southeast Asia; at least as consistent if not more so than formal US allies, Thailand and the Philippines. We had done so even when it was unfashionable during the Vietnam War when the US was in dire need of Asian political support. We had volunteered support because it was in our interest. But it was a calculation of interest that we need not have made – notwithstanding the “Special Relationship”, even the British were half-hearted in their support for the Vietnam War — and a calculation that was not without domestic risk for the government. After the Hendrickson affair broke, I recall Mr Lee Kuan Yew saying that the US should not assume that our ground was naturally in support of America. It was a choice the Singapore government made and having made, had to politically sustain. It was not unreasonable to expect the US government would help and not hinder us.

Yet here was an accredited diplomat from a friendly country, with the support and encouragement of his immediate State Department superiors, and in defiance of

all diplomatic practice enshrined as international law in the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, enthusiastically promoting opposition to the PAP government, promising shelter and succour to the chosen ones if they ran into trouble. Clearly, advancing human rights and democracy was now American policy and not just propaganda; an interest that the US considered central enough to risk a long nurtured and mutually beneficial relationship. Why? It was not as if they wished us ill. I was acquainted with Mr Hendrickson and his State Department superiors. I was sure they were not enemies. They did what they did simply because we did not fit neatly into their theories of political development. Now that the Cold War was ending, they saw an opportunity to nudge us in the direction that the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan had taken. In their minds, they were doing us a favour.

I do not think it was a mistake to have supported the US then and to continue to support the US now. But there was a lesson to be drawn from this episode. The lesson is not that the US was ungrateful. Gratitude is not a concept that is greatly relevant to the understanding of international affairs. If you expect gratitude in international relations, adopt a dog and name it “Foreign Policy”. The relevant concept is interest; interests change and they do not change to suit our conveniences. It is therefore vital to try, the best we can, to look over the horizon to see what may be coming our way. I decided to study human rights and democracy more closely than I had hitherto done to try to better understand their evolving role in post-Cold War geopolitics.

In 1992, I wrangled a three-month sabbatical at one of the older British universities. The first, most valuable and enduring lesson I learnt was from the don assigned to guide my studies, although it was perhaps not the lesson he would have chosen or intended to impart. He was a very distinguished historian of Southeast Asia, with a contemporary interest in human rights in what was then known as Burma and East Timor; so immensely learned that he had probably forgotten more about the region than I could ever hope to learn. But the Southeast Asia he talked to me about – and he spoke very eruditely and with great passion about human rights and democracy in our region – seemed to me to bear little relationship to the place I actually lived in and had dealt with in my previous work as Director for Southeast Asia in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We met only once. I never went back to see him again and he never asked to see me again. It was probably for the best.

The lesson I took away from this encounter was simple: when thinking about human rights and democracy, Conviction, however fervent, and Authority, however majestic, are not the same things as practicality or even reality. Common sense you may think, but this is an idea that is akin to heresy in the human rights community which too often confuses feeling good with doing Good.

I began this lecture by pointing out that the shade of Rashomon constantly lurks around talk about human rights and democracy, making it particularly susceptible to misunderstanding. So please do not misunderstand me. Let me state my

position plainly and unequivocally: I am not against human rights; I think human rights are one of the most important ideas that the human species has ever invented. What I am sceptical about – deeply sceptical — is what I have termed the Myth of Universality: the assumption that when we speak about rights or democracy we will all always mean the same thing just because we use the same words, and that the same words will always be applicable in the same way everywhere.

The Myth of Universality is what I called in the first of these lectures, a “false framework”: an ontological device into which we try to force a stubbornly elusive and ever shifting reality in order to comfort ourselves with the illusion of comprehension. I argued that resorting to false frameworks in the more than usually ambiguous and uncertain post-Cold War times that we are experiencing is dangerous. This particular false framework is perhaps more dangerous than others because human rights and democracy seem to be the one reliable fixed point of reference in an age without definition.

No country has rejected The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since the Universal Declaration was adopted in 1948, an elaborate apparatus of international and regional human rights treaties, declarations and institutions have enmeshed relations between states and whatever their actual practice, states can no longer credibly argue that their internal affairs are in principle entirely only their own business. During the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union validated their

policies by opposing ideas of universal norms. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, only one definition of the Universal seemed to be left standing.

Only the exceptionally obtuse would cling to a false framework that is demonstrably false. But all I have just described is *not* demonstrably false, only partially and contingently true. This is a more subtle concept and therefore more difficult to grasp. Any idea that is only partially and contingently true is an intellectual shape-shifter. What is true and what is not true is in flux and thus elusive, particularly when there are no clear or attractive alternatives.

The brief post-Cold War American unipolar moment has passed. Europe lacks the power to force acceptance of its ideas which in Europe's present predicaments are in any case not particularly appealing, even to many Europeans. Post-Soviet Russia seems to have reverted to an older idea: that of the great 19th century Russian philosopher, Pytor Chaadaev, who said of his country "We never went with other peoples". China is not interested in promoting any idea of the Universal except its own intrinsic superiority as a normative value, and that primarily in East Asia where it is contested. India may accept western universal values, but I think only with regard to some of its internal arrangements and not as an over-riding international authority.

There are also more fundamental conceptual problems with the notion of universality. The idea that runs through the work of Isaiah Berlin – a liberal British

political philosopher who deserves to be more widely read and understood than he is today – is that there is not one Good but many goods each of which may have its own validity but which are not necessarily reconcilable or capable of simultaneous realisation. This is an idea that many liberals seem to find hard to accept: there is nothing more intolerant than a liberal in full bray in defence of liberalism asserted, somewhat self-contradictorily, as an absolute value. This often leads liberals into thickets of paradox, confusion and contradiction. Examples are not hard to find. Earlier this year, some students at Yale-NUS called for Ambassador Chan Heng Chee to be sacked from the school's Board because they took offence at her defence of Singapore's position on LGBT rights at Singapore's Second Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Council on Human Rights in Geneva. Curiously, it did not seem to occur to the students that the value of a liberal education is precisely to instil openness to other views even if you do not agree with them.

After the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris, it struck me that there was a similarity in the modes of thought of the terrorists and the cartoonists, not moral equivalence in their actions because there is clearly none, but a similarity of thought processes: both held their values so absolutely that they thought it justified anything. Murder is wrong, but is lampooning a religion right? The fact that the terrorists held a completely mistaken view of Islam is beside the point. The point is that they believed in it; believed in it as fervently as the cartoonists believed in freedom of expression.

I wrote an article for The Straits Times along these lines. The French ambassador took umbrage, at what exactly I am still not quite sure. He wrote a letter to The Straits Times to refute me. That was his right. I did not find his arguments convincing and explained why in a response to his letter. But he went further and complained to my bosses about me and got his own boss to do so as well, clearly to try to shut me up. In other words, he attempted to mobilise superior force to deprive me of my freedom of expression; the very freedom the French state, indeed all Europe, defended in the case of the cartoonists. My bosses quite properly told the Ambassador that my views are my own and if he did not agree with them to talk to me to convince me of the error of my ways. He has not done so. I do not in any way blame the Ambassador for trying coercion rather than persuasion. In his position I would have done the same. But then I have never been accused of being a liberal. Perhaps he secretly isn't a liberal too.

These are trivial anecdotes. But there is a serious point to them. If there is not one Good but many goods which are irreconcilable, then we must either impose our concept of the Good by force, which in history has occurred all too often with very bloody consequences – or moderate our own ideas to minimize friction and seek some *modus vivendi* between different conceptions of the good in order to lessen the probability of conflict. As Isaiah Berlin said in his famous lecture 'Two Concepts of Liberty': "Freedom for the pike is death to the minnows: the liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others."

The idea of human rights is qualitatively different from the idea of a rock or a stone or a tree or the idea that the earth is round. A rock is a rock irrespective of whether or not we believe in it and the earth remains round even if we think it is flat. The idea that human rights have an autonomous reality or are somehow “natural rights” is, as the 19th century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously said, “rhetorical nonsense – nonsense on stilts”. Some legal scholars have argued that human rights are now *jus cogens*. Louis Henkin has, for example, argued that human rights reflect a “new law of fundamental values adopted by the international system”. But I don’t see how Bentham’s basic point can be avoided by dressing up “nonsense on stilts” in lawyer’s Latin. This does not mean that human rights and international law can be dismissed as unimportant. What it means is that international law and human rights are, as I alluded to earlier, human inventions: civilising myths that we have chosen to believe in so that we may at least occasionally live in a civilised manner; faith not objective reality. The apple will always fall even if I stubbornly choose not to believe in gravity. Faith is subjective. There is no reason to assume that we will all always believe in the same thing in the same way even when we appear to do so. Violent quarrels have erupted even in monotheistic religions.

Although the idea that humans have rights of some sort has won general acceptance, most specific rights are still essentially contested concepts where superficial agreement, sometimes no more than agreement over vocabulary, masks deep conflicts over interpretation and implementation. This is true even with

something as basic as the right to life where there is fundamental and visceral disagreement over capital punishment, mandated by Sharia law, and abortion which some Christians equate with murder. If Life itself can be disputed, how much real agreement over the ever expanding range of other ideas claimed as rights can we realistically expect? Advocates argue that human rights are aspirational global norms. I do not disagree. But that does not get around Isaiah Berlin's insight into the plurality of values and the essentially contested nature of many rights held up as aspirations.

Failure to recognise these realities leads either to a mindless formalism – a numbers game of encouraging states to sign human rights instruments that they do not have the capacity or even the intention to implement – or leads back to coercion. Anyone familiar with the United Nations has witnessed the less than edifying spectacle of western diplomats threatening, sometimes subtly, sometimes otherwise, but always apparently oblivious to the irony of their actions, to withhold desperately needed aid from less developed countries unless they supported some human rights resolution or another. I am not shocked by such behaviour. It is entirely understandable. Many a career in multilateral diplomacy has hung on a comma or a word in some obscure resolution and some countries need to find grounds for believing that they are still world powers. These are perfectly logical and justifiable reasons for what they do. But we should not call it promoting human rights. We should not forget that the promotion of human rights and democracy is not just a high moral calling but also an industry.

When I returned from my sabbatical at the beginning of 1993, I became involved in preparations for the United Nations Conference on Human Rights that was to be held in Vienna later that year. It was intended to be a festival celebrating western victory in the Cold War. The beginning of the 1990s was, however, a period of great potential geopolitical complication. After the Cold War the West was drunk with hubris; China was beginning to take off and, freed of the imperatives and constraints of their *de facto* anti-Soviet alliance, the US and China were beginning to eye each other warily, particularly after the Tiananmen incident. President Bill Clinton had been elected in 1993. The Democrats had been out of power for two decades, except for the atypical four years of the Carter administration that even Democrats seemed eager to forget. Clinton had accused his predecessor of “coddling dictators” and an inexperienced administration seemed somewhat more than merely inclined to take a harder line with China and give human rights and democracy promotion a more prominent role in US-China relations. But these were issues on which the Chinese Communist Party would never compromise. The potential for trouble in US-China relations seemed great and if trouble broke out it would have rocked our entire region. Our memories of the Hendrickson affair were also still fresh – I hope my younger colleagues have not entirely forgotten it – and the new Democrat administration did not know Singapore or the region as well as the Republicans. The Asia specialists in the new administration, who did know us very well, did not appear to be the most influential voices in its inner counsels.

This was the context of what came to be known as the “Asian values” debate which was more about geopolitics than values of any description. The goals of the debate were modest: to encourage a more complex and realistic view of political development in East Asia and buy some time for the passions of a new administration to cool and common sense and the imperatives of *realpolitik* to prevail. But it made for a fraught run-up to the Vienna Conference. More fraught than I thought at that time.

An Asian Group preparatory meeting for the Vienna Conference was held in Bangkok in April 1993. Prior to the meeting a friend in the US Embassy in Singapore had taken me aside and rather cryptically sounded a cautionary note about the American diplomat who had been assigned by the State Department in Washington to observe the meeting. She was, he vaguely intimated, inclined to ingratiate herself with the new administration and so I should make a special effort to keep her thoroughly briefed. It is one of the minor regrets of my career that I did not take his advice seriously enough. But it would have in any case been difficult to take his advice because I never set eyes on the lady. God only knows where she was, how she got her information and what she reported. My regret is minor because I doubt it would have made much difference if I had made more of an effort to track her down. I later heard she had been given a junior ambassadorial appointment sometime after she returned from Bangkok.

The Bangkok meeting was split on the core issue of the universality or otherwise of human rights and democracy. The basic division was between the more western oriented members of the group such as Japan and South Korea who were clearly and reluctantly under instructions to act as American proxies and countries like Iran and China on the other end of the spectrum of opinion. The majority, including Singapore, were somewhere in-between. The final compromise was contained in Article 8 of the Bangkok Declaration that reads as follows: “[Ministers and representatives of Asian governments] recognise that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds.”

This was taken as a challenge to the western idea of universality and provoked a storm of controversy after Bangkok and at Vienna. I confess to having played a role in suggesting the idea and drafting the language of Article 8. The controversy bewildered me then and baffles me still. My approach was historical and the text was intended to be, and I still think is, no more than a straightforward statement of fact. All norms evolve. How we conceived of, say, women’s rights or LGBT rights 50 or 20 or just 10 years ago is not how we conceive of them now and we will not conceive of them in the same way a hundred years hence. The evolution of rights and political systems must necessarily be conditioned by responses to specific events and issues including, among other things, history, culture and religion, and

our understanding of all these and many other factors also evolve over time. There is no reason to expect that evolution of rights must necessarily be teleological or a Whiggish story of ever advancing progress up and up and on and on.

It is with a tad of *schadenfreude* that I watch the EU and Australia struggle with refugees. Singapore was once roundly criticised by these countries for defying what they maintained was established international law on the rights of refugees by not recognising an automatic right to asylum and taking a tough stand to deter Vietnamese boat people from seeking shelter here. I do not think that the problems Europe and Australia today face can be managed within the existing framework of international law on refugee rights which was established in 1951 essentially to deal with displaced persons, mainly of European origin, after the Second World War. The magnitude, causes and quality of refugee flows are today entirely different. The 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol are obsolete. But it is extremely unlikely that the domestic politics of key countries will allow these instruments to be updated in any way that will allow them to provide an adequate international legal framework for managing contemporary refugee flows. Consequently, countries will do what they must.

Australia has already changed tack and adopted refugee policies harsher than we ever did. Last year the Human Rights Council criticised Australia for breaking international law. I think Europe will eventually have to do so too. It will be far more difficult for the EU and its member states to make adjustments because the

refugee crisis confronts Europe with existential questions about itself and member states are divided on what adjustments to make. The EU is now desperately trying every other expedient to avoid having to face the issue squarely. But reality cannot be evaded forever. As Mr Lee Kuan Yew once said apropos the Vietnamese boat-people, “you have to grow calluses on your heart or bleed to death”.

The refugee crisis in Europe is a vivid example of value pluralism and how different conceptions of the good are not necessarily always reconcilable. It is good to abide by international law. It is good to take care of refugees. It is good to ensure that one’s own citizens feel secure and comfortable in their own country. Can all three goods be simultaneously realised? I doubt it.

I must stress however that value pluralism is not the same thing as value relativity. Although these concepts are sometimes confused, they are in fact diametrically opposed because value pluralism implies no hierarchy of values whereas some notion of hierarchy is implicit in the idea of relativity. It is precisely because value pluralism assumes no hierarchy that conflicts of values arise. And when such conflicts arise, the process by which states try to reconcile them or at least reach a *modus vivendi* between differing conceptions of the good is a political process.

Last year at a conference in Switzerland, I listened to Mario Monti, the former Prime Minister of Italy and former EU Commissioner admit that the root cause of the refugee crisis in Europe was failure in the domestic politics of EU member

states. He argued that while EU institutions worked reasonably well, the idea of “Europe” was too abstract for the peoples of member states to understand and consequently their politics were driven by short-term considerations. Mr Monti’s analysis was correct but did not go far enough.

The EU’s idea of “Europe” is utopian and unsustainable – one is tempted to call it the Soviet Union with human rights – and the divergence between the ideals of the EU elite and their peoples has led to the rise of anti-EU, anti-migrant and in some cases, anti-Semitic, right-wing movements. Much of the same phenomenon is present in the US. The outrageous comments Donald Trump has made on women and minorities taps into the anger of his white working class base who feel culturally as well economically insecure because a once familiar America – perhaps imagined but nevertheless real in their minds – had been “stolen” from them by liberal elites and mainstream political leaders who have promoted women’s rights, gay rights and the rights of minorities and migrant workers. That the President is African-American does not help either. When the gap between what elites consider desirable and the general public considers comfortable grows too wide, democratic politics becomes dysfunctional. It is a lesson we should think about in Singapore too.

In the 21st century a more fundamental *structural* contradiction may be developing between the ideas of “democracy” and “human rights”. Democracy is a protean term. Western liberal democracy is one historical variant and even that variant has

changed over time and will continue to change. But what all variants of democracy have in common is the idea that first emerged in Europe at the end of the 17th century and gathered force during the 18th century, that sovereignty resides in and derives from the Will of The People rather than from Divine Right, the Mandate of Heaven or Bloodline or some other principle. It established itself as the dominant legitimating idea during the 19th century. Today all political systems, except for a handful mainly in the Middle East, legitimate themselves by this general principle. During the 20th century, three models of mass politics based on this idea emerged: western liberal democracy, fascism and communist “people’s democracy”. All three still exist, even fascism in the thankfully much attenuated form of extreme right-wing movements. One may have a preference for one model or another, but all share the same intellectual roots and it is ahistorical and pretentious to claim an unquestionable superiority or universality for your preference.

Sovereignty resides in the will of the people, but who are “The People”? The meaning of the phrase is not stable. It steadily expanded in the course of the 20th century. The idea of “The People” is now being deconstructed by the centrifugal forces unleashed by the collision of 18th century political philosophy with 21st century communications technology in the form of the Internet and social media. Moreover “The People” today claim – or have claims made on their behalf by self- appointed activists whose visions and concerns are generally narrow-- an ever- expanding slew of rights, and claim them in an ever more absolutist manner, a process again accentuated by the Internet which has also enabled the idea of “The

People” to escape the boundaries of the nation-state. All these forces are loosening, perhaps irrevocably, the sense of national community and national solidarity that I think is essential to democracy. Politics is fragmenting, making government and the pursuit of coherent public policies more difficult everywhere. In my darker moments, I wonder whether the rigidities of ideological faith have caused the technologies that were the fruits of human ingenuity to far outpace the capacity of human ingenuity to adapt our political and social institutions to deal with them. We cannot abandon the technologies. The answer cannot be just more faith in human ingenuity. Faith is nothing but hope which might well prove forlorn.

Western confidence in the superiority of its model was based on the link between its political processes and the superior outcomes those processes produced, particularly economic outcomes. China’s growth challenges confidence in that link at a time when the link is already looking shaky. But China is no real alternative. In Europe and the US, political dysfunctionalities are far more advanced. Nevertheless, as I argued in my second lecture, we are all “western” now and no country in any region is entirely spared. Since the communist system developed from the same 18th century political philosophy and China cannot insulate itself from 21st century communications technologies, China too suffers from its own strain of this global disease – insecurity is the cause of its overly assertive nationalism — which may prove equally resistant to treatment.

Political dysfunctionalities are not going to be resolved by trying to delink the political process from outcomes through the now-fashionable but bloodless concept of “governance”, as if valid universal principles of public policy can be somehow neatly abstracted from an increasingly messy and diverse political reality. Public policy is not some Platonic ideal stored up in heaven waiting to be discovered by the contemplation of superior minds serenely detached from the hurly-burly of events. A policy that cannot be sold politically is no policy. If some principles are truly universal, the commonalities exist only at such a high level of generality that they have little practical relevance as guides to how different societies and cultures should actually govern or organise themselves. Charles S. Maier, a distinguished historian of the modern state, called governance “the utopia of the Masters of Public Policy”, a thought that the school under whose auspices these lectures are being held and the prissier sort of civil servant would do well to always bear in mind.

While writing this lecture, I came across a commentary in the Financial Times of 20th April which described Europe and North America as suffering from what the author termed “sophisticated state failure”. This, he argued, “fuels the Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen insurgencies and endangers the ability of advanced societies to secure a bright future for their citizens”. Sophisticated state failure occurs when “by and large everything works as it should in mature democracies”, yet where little actually gets done, including economic reforms that everyone acknowledges are necessary, because governing is very difficult, voters are fickle,

majorities are unstable and hence politicians unwilling to take risks. This sets up – and this is my paraphrase of the author’s argument — a vicious cycle of increasingly frustrated voters disillusioned with the political process. He called it “a cancer eating away at societies in the west and undermining the liberal world order”. The author, the Director of Carnegie Europe, had observed much the same dysfunctionalities as I did. His solution? “The only lasting way out of sophisticated state failure is for responsible politicians to worry less about getting re-elected and to start risking their political careers for things that need to be done.” This is advice that only a desperate intellectual would give, and only angels in heaven would take.

Failure to free oneself of the shackles of the false framework of Universality leads to such tautological “solution”. A better if partial answer is to take a practical and not ideological approach to human rights and democracy: to hold our beliefs in these values loosely, contingently and transactionally. Human rights and democracy are not just desirable ends in themselves, but also means that should be evaluated and implemented on the basis of their utility. Any good idea taken to extremes becomes absurd or self-defeating or both. In December last year the New York Times reported that one of those responsible for the terrorist attacks in Paris earlier that month may have escaped arrest in Brussels because of a law banning police raids on private homes from 9pm to 5am. Human rights have historically been rights held by the individual against an overly powerful state;

democracy a means of taming Leviathan. But what if Leviathan is now metamorphosing into Gulliver held down by myriad silken threads of Rights?

Men of goodwill believe that education and dialogue will enable us to arrive at consensus between different conceptions of the good, or if not consensus at least peaceful coexistence or common space. But those inclined to participate in such dialogues and respond to education are usually those who are already inclined to seek common ground or coexistence and hence are least in need of education or dialogue. Consensus and common space are in any case always tentative and in constant renegotiation. It is the fundamental purpose of politics and government to hold the ring as neutral arbiter and to maintain whatever consensus or common space may pertain at any point of time, if necessary by the exercise of the coercive powers that are the legitimate monopoly of the state, including the pre-emptive or prophylactic exercise of such powers. This is a particularly urgent function of the state at a time when few countries are homogenous, when multiculturalism frowns upon attempts to homogenise a country and identity politics is spreading.

When conflicts of values lead to violence, as they did during the attack on Charlie Hebdo, it is because of state failure: because the state was lulled into complacency or hamstrung by its own ideology; because the state was too weak or too timid to take decisive action, or because the state was unable to resist the temptation to seek political advantage by privileging one group or system of values over another. And lest you think I am unduly smug about the situation in the West,

let me remind you that we need not look very far from our own borders to find examples of such situations existing or developing. We can find examples of groups seeking special privilege for their values — thankfully as yet without success — even within our own borders.

I am not arguing that the traditional concept of rights held by the individual against the state has become unimportant. But that concept of rights is at best only a partial answer to the perennial problem of balancing justice with order. Order requires justice, but there can be no justice without order which must include a minimal societal consensus and a functioning political process. Justice is itself a contested concept and since what one group sees as “Just” another group may regard as an intolerable tyranny, there must be some means of adjudicating between different conceptions of the “Just”. Every country must find its own balance in the context of its particular circumstances. Democracy is a self-indigenising concept, greatly influenced by the *terroir* in which it is planted. This also makes it extremely difficult to impose any particular variant of democracy from the outside. Once any balance is disrupted by internal or external forces pushing too far or too quickly in one direction or another, it can be extremely difficult to restore a sensible equilibrium. President Obama’s election can be seen as an attempt to restore balance to the American system after the post-9/11 excesses of the Neoconservatives. I am not confident that he has yet succeeded.

Ladies & gentlemen, some of you may consider that I have strayed too far into the abstract. But I thought it important to expose some of the conceptual complexities of the ideas of human rights and democracy that do not often enough see daylight. “Democracy” and “human rights” are not magical incantations that when uttered make all problems vanish. They are important but contested and sometimes internally contradictory concepts that may create new problems even if they solve others. Understanding the concepts better makes it more likely we can assess them clinically, implement them practically, and not unthinkingly fall under their thrall.

Ideological blinkers have led to deficits of political leadership in major countries that exacerbate the uncertainties of post-Cold War international relations. Since leadership failures are not just the results of the deficiencies of individuals but have structural and conceptual causes, we will have to suffer them for a long time to come. In my previous lectures I briefly sketched some examples of how false frameworks have led to geopolitical complication: the knots that Europe has tied itself into; failure to anticipate Moscow’s response to the feckless attempt to draw Ukraine away from Russia; the disastrous interventions in the Middle East and North Africa, and the idea that economic reform must lead to political reform that is the root of the strategic mistrust that complicates US-China relations. What all these examples have in common is the cardinal sin of foreign policy: wishful thinking; mistaking hopes for reality.

The effects of wishful thinking are not confined to the immediate regions where the error occurs, are unpredictable and can linger long after the error was committed. The descent of Iraq and later Libya and Syria into chaos after western interventions — these countries cannot be put together again and exist only as names and flags — did not initiate, but almost certainly accelerated and accentuated, the influence of Middle Eastern varieties of Islam, sectarian tensions and terrorist ideologies on Southeast Asian Muslims. This has changed the texture of Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and hence the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the plural societies of Southeast Asia. The consequences will be difficult to manage and will unfold for many years, perhaps decades, to come.

The ill-considered American intervention in Iraq elevated Iran's regional position, shook Saudi Arabia's confidence in the US, promoted an apocalyptically existential view of Sunni-Shia competition — a proxy for geopolitical fears of Iran — which has led Riyadh into policies in Yemen and elsewhere that may well undermine what stability, including its own, that remains in the Middle East. If this occurs, it will certainly have further consequences for our own region.

The Middle East distracted the US from responding effectively for a critical decade when China was consolidating its position in Southeast Asia and trying to shape the regional architecture to its advantage. It was only at the very end of the George W. Bush administration that the US began to be persuaded that the game

was worth the candle and the US has been playing catch-up ever since. The western response to the so-called “Arab Spring” – the very choice of metaphor illustrates the depth of wishful thinking: summer inevitably follows spring and Arab summers are notoriously hot – compounded the effects of American distraction. Within the space of a mere week, the US went from standing by Mubarak as a staunch 30-year ally, to refusing him a dignified exit from power and unceremoniously dumping him. By comparison, the Hendrickson affair was very small beer. Mubarak’s treatment recalled the US treatment of Suharto, another 30-year friend, in 1998. And both the treatment of Mubarak and Suharto were starkly different from how the US had arranged safe passage to Hawaii when Marcos fell. Even the dregs of Cold War imperatives had a moderating influence on the US response at that time. But how the US treated Mubarak and the echoes it sounded with Suharto’s treatment, raised doubts about the reliability of US commitments at a time when China was emphasising its inescapable geographic reality to ASEAN. And despite President Obama’s attempts to “rebalance” US attention, the now more than usually turbulent Middle East will be a continuing distraction for his successors.

I could go on multiplying examples, but there is no need to belabour the point. It is not my argument that the Myth of Universality was the only cause of these and other blunders. No country ever looks at the world only through a single lens. No country can pursue policies that are perfectly consistent with any principle. But the distortions of the Myth of Universality have in my view had a particularly

deleterious effect on post-Cold War international relations. We should not underestimate the enduring power of its attraction. It is a mode of thought that I think originates in the monotheistic Christian traditions that are the foundations of even the most secular of western societies and so deeply a part of the western worldview and sense of self that nothing as mundane as empirical evidence of error can loosen its hold on the western imagination. If today the US again focuses less on what it considers the inadequacies of political systems in Southeast Asia, this is perhaps due more to the imperative of dealing with US-China competition and terror than any genuine change of mind. As it did during the Cold War, I think the US has only decided to bide its time.

Nor are American dogmas the only ones to reckon with. American ideology may be disciplined by strategic realities, but Europe plays no significant strategic role in our region and therefore can afford the luxury of assuming moralistic postures. Not long before I retired it was my not entirely uncongenial duty to take to task a European diplomat who had crossed the boundary of acceptable diplomatic practice in his dealings with our opposition. No, it was not the French Ambassador. This was an experienced diplomat who knew full well that there is a difference between cultivating the opposition to gather information – this is acceptable diplomatic practice and our diplomats do so too — and interfering in our domestic politics by encouraging the opposition. He did so entirely conscious that he was crossing a boundary. He chanced his hand, hoping we would not notice. After our last general election it was reported to me that some other European diplomats

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were grumbling because the natives – that's us by the way — were not wise enough to vote in accordance with *their* preferences. Why should we? But as I said in an earlier lecture, it seems very difficult for the white man to lay down his burden. We have to understand the Myth of Universality because it is one of the many uncertainties – domestic and international -- that we will have to manage for the foreseeable future.

Ladies & gentlemen, we are almost at the end of this long drawn-out torture that it pleases the Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School to call the IPS-Nathan Lectures. My final lecture will examine how Singapore is affected by the broad post-Cold War international trends this and previous lectures have described, whether we can cope, and what we will need to do in do in order to cope. Thank you.

Bilahari Kausikan is ambassador-at-large in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore. He is also the Institute of Policy Studies' 2015/16 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. This speech was delivered during his fourth IPS-Nathan Lecture on 29 April 2016. His fifth and final lecture will be on 25 May 2016.