

# **IPS-Nathan Lectures**

## **Dealing With an Ambiguous World Lecture I: An Age Without Definition**

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**29 January 2016  
Kent Ridge Guild Hall**

I am grateful to the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and its Institute of Policy Studies for inviting me to deliver this second series of the IPS-Nathan Lectures. It was an honour that I was initially reluctant to accept. But Janadas, true to the reputation of the region from which his ancestors hailed, snookered me. On reflection, however, it was too tempting to forgo the opportunity to inflict on you my views on some aspects of the foreign policy challenges. That mitigates the circumstances that resulted in my standing before you this evening but does not erase them. I thank the organisers, but I shall not forget his favour.

Singapore is a unique country in many ways. One of our less discussed peculiarities is that although there can be few countries more exposed to and dependent on the international environment than we are, the level of public interest in and understanding of foreign policy is not high. Indeed I sometimes think of us as rather parochial. I must confess that for much of my career as a Foreign Service Officer I found it convenient to practise my trade without the distractions and complications of public attention that bedevil the diplomats of other countries. But I have since come to the conclusion — and not just because I am now safely retired with no executive responsibilities — that this is not only unsustainable, but undesirable.

Our domestic politics are becoming more complex. A more educated electorate is demanding a greater voice in policy. It is inevitable that sooner or later this will include foreign policy. This is not necessarily a bad thing since successful foreign policy must ultimately rest on a firm domestic consensus of shared assumptions. Such a foundation does not yet exist in Singapore. In its absence, foreign policy is being drawn into the arena of partisan politics in ways that could be kindly called naïve, but I think is more accurately described as irresponsible. We will increasingly need the ballast of an informed and realistic public understanding of foreign policy to keep us on a safe course.

At present debates over domestic policies more often than not take place devoid of context, as if what we do on this tiny island can be entirely insulated from what is happening around us or as if we have an entirely free hand to do as we please. This

can be dangerous. At very least it leads to the loss of a sense of proportion when discussing domestic policies. Singapore is in a paradoxical situation: Too many of our compatriots, particularly of the scribbling and chattering classes, that is to say our intelligentsia, sometimes seem almost ashamed of being Singaporean, whereas we are the object of admiration and emulation by foreigners.

I am not arguing that our policies are beyond criticism. Far from it. Without criticism we cannot improve. And of course we should take the praises of foreigners, even when sincere, with a large dose of salt. But criticism must be informed by what is and is not possible for a small country situated in a complicated and often dangerous region. In a globalised world, there is no domestic policy that is not to some degree influenced by the external environment. It is unfortunate that too often foreigners seem more aware of the constraints under which Singapore labours and hence can better appreciate what we have been able to do despite our constraints.

Singapore improbably survived and prospered over the last 50 years in no small part because of the ability of our founding generation of leaders to understand the world in which we found ourselves unexpectedly independent, and to devise policies that enabled us to navigate its dangers. I have spoken elsewhere of the vulnerabilities of small states and the principles our founding leaders established, that enabled us to mitigate them and which still guide our foreign policy. My views on these matters are already on public record and I do not intend to repeat myself. Instead I will, in this and subsequent lectures, sketch in broad strokes the changes in the external environment that we will face going forward, the strategic challenges that this will pose, and consider the extent to which we are prepared to meet them.

But first, a word or two about an aspect of foreign policy that I believe is not sufficiently understood. Its relationship to my subject may not be immediately obvious, but bear with me because I hope to make its relevance clear to those of you hardy enough to stay the course to the end of this series of lectures.

A successful foreign policy must take the world as it is and not mistake hopes for reality. This requires a clinical — indeed cold-blooded — assessment of our external environment. This is not easy. Information is almost always incomplete; obfuscation, if not downright deception, is a given and humans are unique in their innate propensity to deceive themselves. In my experience, the poorer sort of diplomat is somewhat more prone to self-deception than other members of the human species. Being called “Excellency” all the time doesn’t make you excellent.

But there is also a more fundamental problem. Foreign policy deals with sentient beings that act and react with one another. The very effort to understand our environment changes what we are trying to understand. This makes the human world, which includes the realm of foreign policy, different from the material world that conforms to the laws of physics. A rock is a rock and will forever be only a rock. But human relations, including international relations, are a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of unpredictable patterns of possibilities. The result is complexity that, if not entirely unfathomable, is at least difficult for the human mind to grasp in a holistic way.

We cannot live in a state of perpetual perplexity or doubt; foreign policy cannot be made by Hamlets.

To deal with complexity we, whether consciously or not, resort to mental frameworks to simplify reality in order to comprehend it, in order to act. Simplification must result in some degree of distortion. And since we all do not chose to use the same frameworks, we do not all see or experience anything in exactly the same way. Moreover, all these frameworks — international law, international organisation, international community, all the concepts we use to try to make sense of international relations, indeed the very notion of “international relations” itself — are essentially human artefacts that have little autonomous existence beyond what we invest in them by choosing to believe in their utility. And since we do not all share the same beliefs and what we believe changes, they are all at best always only partially and contingently true.

I do not want to exaggerate the point. We cannot just live happily in our own private worlds. In practice, there is usually a great deal of consensus among states on the basic premises and frameworks of international relations. And there are physical realities that prescribe the range of mental frameworks that we can rationally choose to believe in, for example, that Singapore is a small country not a continent, located in Southeast Asia not the South Pacific. The human world does not have quite the same status as the material world but nevertheless has its own insistent reality that we ignore only at our peril.

There is nevertheless always some measure of choice, not always conscious, involved in the selection of what frameworks to use. Thereby arises the possibility of error; human nature being as it is, it is seductively easy to believe that our choices, our ideas, must be immutable facts that brook no alternatives. The highly educated and highly intelligent are more prone to this sort of error. Adam Smith is credited with the observation that “the learned give up the evidence of their senses to preserve the coherence of the ideas of their imagination.” When this occurs — when the gap between our mental frameworks and reality grows too wide — the results are not pretty.

After the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the US Federal Reserve confessed that his intellectual assumptions of a lifetime had been shaken and he was still trying to understand what had happened. He has since written a book to explain why economic forecasters failed so miserably. I haven't read it so I do not know his conclusions. But it is not my impression that the market fundamentalism and the political dysfunctionalities that were clearly among the factors responsible for the financial crisis have gone away. It is a cliché but nevertheless true that the hardest thing to change is a mind.

I believe the world is now at greater risk of this kind of error. We are in a phase of greater than usual international uncertainty.

The proximate cause was the end of the Cold War. President Putin of Russia is notorious in the West for describing the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the major geopolitical disaster of the century.” In human terms, for former Soviet citizens, particularly ethnic Russians, whose psychological bearings were cast adrift overnight, many of whom found themselves trapped in the often hostile environments of newly independent former Soviet republics, this was no more than a statement of fact. But one need not be infected with nostalgia for the glories, real or imagined, of the Soviet past or sentimental about the Cold War, to appreciate Mr Putin’s comment on other grounds.

For almost half a century after the end of the Second World War, our fundamental understanding of the world — the basic mental framework that all states held in common — was the Cold War. It established the essential processes of international relations for us all. Irrespective of which side of the ideological divide we stood, and even if we tried to steer clear of either side by a policy of Non-Alignment — which was always for the majority of the Movement more pretence than real — the Cold War prescribed the parameters of the possible for us all with a stark and brutal clarity.

Despite its dangers, and they were great, the Cold War had one virtue — a clearly defined structure. The very danger gave the structure sharp resolution. Clarity and danger created order. The early Cold War saw several US-Soviet crises in the Caribbean, Berlin and the Middle East. But direct superpower confrontation soon proved too dangerous, and by the mid-1960s their competition largely manifested itself through proxies in peripheral regions where defeat or victory engaged no vital interests of the superpowers.

The result was what one scholar has called “The Long Peace”. This was of course peace between the superpowers. It was not very peaceful for those careless, reckless, foolish or unfortunate enough to become proxies. But for prudent or lucky states on the periphery — and prudence creates its own luck — there was never very much doubt about how to position ourselves within the Cold War structure to

avoid getting entangled in superpower proxy wars and perhaps even obtain some modest advantage from their rivalry. Singapore was among them.

That clarity of choice is gone and will not be recreated. We now have danger — although of a lesser magnitude — without clearly defined structure. No one really knows what will, or can, replace the Cold War structure. It has been a quarter of a century since the Berlin Wall came down and the USSR imploded, yet we can still only define our times by reference to the age that preceded it; we still call this “the post-Cold War”. We live in an age without definition.

There was a brief post-Cold War moment when one country seemed to hold all the levers of the world in its hands. The western side of the Cold War structure was entirely an American creation. The US and the Soviet Union both claimed to embody universal values. Once the latter was discredited and its Cold War structure dissolved, there seemed no alternative to American-led institutions, American power, American values and American ideas. History had ended. The economic analogue was “The Great Moderation” whereby the genius of American economists had reduced the complexity of economic systems and human behaviour to neat mathematical formulas, and harnessed the market to once and for all tame the business cycle.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, these delusions were dispelled by the failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the near meltdown of Wall Street. Barack Obama rode the backlash into the White House. The general view regards his election as the vindication of American values. Perhaps. But I take the contrarian view that the very improbability of Mr Obama’s election reflects disillusionment with the post-Cold War definition of American values and a groping after a different and more authentic definition. This at least in part explains the resonance of Obama’s campaign slogan of “change”. But expectations were so high that he was almost bound to disappoint. The unseemly and bewildering spectacle of the current primary campaigns – Republican and Democrat -- suggests that the search for a new definition is still on-going, with undercurrents of desperation and hysteria.

Without global structure, global leadership is diffused. Without global leadership many urgent international issues — take your pick, anything from climate change to proliferation to refugees to pandemics and more — will be left unresolved or dealt with only sub-optimally, enhancing the uncertainties. By the time of the 2008–2009 financial crisis it was clear that the brave new post-Cold War world order had not turned out quite as orderly as President George H. W. Bush, who had confidently proclaimed it, had expected, and that existing international institutions were inadequate to cope with such new types of crises.

Enter the G-20. At the Pittsburgh G-20 Summit in 2009, President Obama announced that the G-20 would replace the G-8 as the “premier forum” for international economic cooperation. The significance of his statement went beyond finance and economics. In effect, he was acknowledging that the American-led Cold War structure could not be the sole basis of a post-Cold War global structure.

The G-20 was thus heralded by some as a sign that the brief post-Cold War unipolar moment had been replaced by multipolarity. The term is imprecise but in so far as multipolarity implies a rough symmetry of power between different “poles” this is not a multipolar world and it is far from clear that it will become multipolar in the foreseeable future. Despite its manifold problems, the US is still at the pinnacle of the international hierarchy in almost every dimension of power and is likely to remain there. If there is multipolarity, it exists only at the regional level. The US is still the only truly global power. But it is also a power whose limits are now evident.

Ian Bremmer of the Eurasia Group has described the contemporary global order as G-Zero. It is a striking metaphor. But in so far as this conveys the image of a formless world, it overstates the case. The American order may be fraying at its edges and inadequate, but it has not disappeared. The G-20 has proved useful, but only within narrow and specialised parameters. The G-20 coexists in a not entirely coordinated fashion with the UN system and the Bretton Woods institutions. The UN, the World Bank, the IMF and other such institutions all still have their uses. But all



are also to some degree dysfunctional; sometimes by design, sometimes because their original design was conceived under very different historical conditions after the Second World War. None is likely to be significantly reformed. We do not face a blank slate to write thereon whatever we please. This poses a different kind of challenge.

As the only truly global power, US leadership is irreplaceable. But it clearly cannot now exercise leadership alone. This is not new. The US did not exercise leadership alone during the Cold War. But without the strategic imperatives of the Cold War, there is no compelling reason for other major powers — US allies included — to accept US leadership except on an ad-hoc and partial basis, which adds to the uncertainties of our time. There is also no compelling reason for the American people to continue shouldering the burdens and sacrifices of leadership. But which country or group of countries has the capacity to, or is inclined to provide sustained help to the US?

Europe? The Transatlantic Alliance was the major pillar of the Western Cold War structure. But the end of the Cold War has deconstructed the idea of the “West” and made explicit what were once implicit nuances between European values and American values. The most liberal American — I use the term in its American sense of willingness to use state power to shape domestic economic and social outcomes — is less interventionist than the most conservative European, and I again use the term in its American sense of being for a minimalist state. These differences could conceivably be managed. But Europe is now also tangled in knots of its own making and has neither the energy nor the appetite to take on global responsibilities, although for reasons of *amour propre* it occasionally pretends to do so, though not always with happy results.

At the very heart of the post-Cold War European idea is a fundamental contradiction. The EU was conceived of as a post-nationalist construct. Ironically it was inspired by nationalist fears of a superior nationalism. Germany is larger than any other European state. After Bismarck united Germany in the 19th century, the “German

Question” led to two world wars. It resurfaced in 1989 after the respite of Cold War division. A reunited Germany was to be tamed by the “pooling of sovereignties”, the centrepieces of which were the common currency and the Schengen Agreement.

But the ambition, once launched, soared beyond Germany. Europe as a community of values was intended to be a new kind of global power. There was to be a new and superior pan-European identity based on an ideal of universal rights and a generous social model. This was as much a delusion as the communist dream of creating a “new socialist man”. Nationalism cannot be wished away. The instinct to define oneself by distinguishing like from the “other” is an intrinsic and primordial part of human nature. Any political project undertaken in defiance of human nature is bound to eventually fail. In this respect the EU stands as a prime example of the futility and danger of letting mental frameworks, however appealing or noble, outrun reality.

European elites deeply believe in their utopian vision of Europe and the elite answer to any obstacle to the realisation of this vision has generally been “more Europe”. But the man-in-the-street, *rue*, *strasse* or *calle* clearly does not agree with his enlightened betters and we are now witnessing the denouement of the internal contradictions of the post-Cold War European idea. The rise of extreme right-wing, neo-fascist anti-EU movements is one manifestation. The Eurozone crisis is another. Was it ever realistic to expect Greeks to behave with the fiscal discipline of Germans? Cultural differences, the social norms they generate and ultimately the differing conceptions of the “good life” do matter. But these are not the worst consequences of the divergence between ideal and reality.

I have never made a secret of my scepticism about the wilder boundaries of the European idea. In response, a European friend — and contrary to the belief of some, I do have several European friends — urged patience. It may take another generation or more, he said, but we will get there. Already young Europeans have embraced the idea of Europe far more enthusiastically than their parents or grandparents, he argued. Who are these young Europeans, I asked. Are they all middle-class, white, employed, at least nominally Christian or secular? He changed

the subject. Too many non-white, Muslim Europeans face discrimination, ghettoisation and disproportionately high levels of unemployment, making them in effect a class of *untermensch*. Is it too fanciful to think that the divergence between the lofty European ideal and the grim reality they experience makes them susceptible to radicalisation? The Paris attacks, and those in London before that, were carried out by such second-generation “Europeans”. The flood of Middle-Eastern refugees and illegal immigrants can only exacerbate the situation.

I take no joy in Europe’s travails. In our own interests we must hope that Europe sorts itself out as soon as possible. But this requires a scaling down of ambition to close the gap between ideal and reality. Among other things this must entail acceptance of a more sustainable social model, some form of fiscal regime policed by Berlin and above all, a painfully wrenching redefinition of European values and the meaning of being European. It will not be easy. Things will probably have to get worse and there will be many a futile gyration to evade reality before the inevitability of change is accepted.

The result will be a different and hopefully a more humble Europe. Certainly not one that can offer an alternative global vision. A “common security and foreign policy” if not abandoned entirely, is unlikely to remain more than a pious aspiration. Europe bungled in the Balkans, bungled in North Africa, and its fecklessness was a major cause of the crisis in Ukraine. Rather than Europe rendering help to the US, it was the US that pulled Europe’s chestnuts out of all these fires on Europe’s own borders. From 1989 to 2014, the defence budgets of all EU members except Estonia stagnated or declined. Terrorist threats and a resurgent Russia notwithstanding, I do not expect significant increases in European defence budgets. Soft power is no substitute for hard power; you cannot have the former if you do not have the latter and contemporary Europe simply cannot afford to be a global geopolitical force.

America’s East Asian allies — Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand — can at best help mainly in their own region and only sporadically

elsewhere. And even in East Asia, as I will explain in a subsequent lecture, they are being subjected to powerful new forces that threaten to constrict what they can do.

Can the BRICS — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — help? I doubt it, at least not in any significant way. Let us not forget that the term was first coined by a fund manager as a marketing slogan designed to part the unwary from their money and not as a geopolitical concept. Since then much of the lustre has worn off these emerging markets and while the BRICS now hold regular Summits and other meetings, have established a secretariat of sorts, and there is even a BRICS Bank, it is still not a self-evidently viable geopolitical concept.

Not much unites the BRICS except the desire for greater recognition of their status. Their ambitions are contradictory or I think will eventually prove contradictory: Does China support India's aspiration to become a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council? Moscow and Beijing now insistently profess partnership, perhaps too insistently, but can Chinese and Russian ambitions in Central Asia really be reconciled? What coherence the BRICS have as a group is provided by their economic links with China, which trades and invests more with each of the others than the rest do with one another, and China's central role in the group is not regarded by the others without ambivalence. In any case, Brazil and South Africa play only relatively limited regional roles which are not uncontested by others in their regions.

Russia is a dissatisfied power, still smouldering with resentment at the loss of superpower status. Its main motivation is to prove that it still matters, particularly in its "near abroad". The story of American and European relations with Russia in the 1990s was one of squandered opportunity. In the immediate post-Cold War period, the US and Europe made a serious strategic mistake by treating post-Soviet Russia condescendingly as a defeated country, and Moscow believes, not without justification, that promises made at the end of the Cold War were not honoured because it was weak. In economic and demographic terms Russia is on a long-term downward trajectory. Still for now it has the political will and sufficient muscle to

demonstrate that its core interests, as in Ukraine and Syria, cannot be disregarded with impunity. Russia is not irrational and will cooperate with the West when its interests dictate it should. But it has no viable new global vision and is not in a position to exercise a global geopolitical role except in a formal diplomatic sense as a Permanent Member of the UNSC.

Unlike Russia, India is not a dissatisfied power. Independent India has always had a global vision of itself. But that very vision has made it wary of playing any other major power's game. Acutely conscious of its ancient civilisation, it certainly will not play deputy to the US sheriff but seek an independent role. Does India's capability match its vision? Not yet. India is reforming. Its long-term prospects are good. Prime Minister Modi clearly wants to change India, but change does not come quickly to a subcontinental-sized country where each constituent state is practically a country unto itself. And notwithstanding its global vision, governing a vast, bewilderingly complicated democracy will always absorb most of any Indian government's energies. India more naturally looks inwards than outwards.

In practice, India's main external preoccupation is Pakistan, perhaps too much so, but understandably given their history and Pakistan's long-standing ties with China. India fought and lost a brief but traumatic war with China in 1962. Its illusions of Chinese-Indian brotherhood shattered, India then spent decades trying its best to ignore China, interacting only at the margins. It no longer has that luxury, but still does not quite know how to deal with China and so eyes it warily, while flirting with China's other Asian rival, Japan. But despite the apparent coincidence of strategic interests — promoted, or at any rate hyped, by their current Prime Ministers — I cannot think of two more mutually incomprehensible Asian cultures than India and Japan. This is not a partnership whose closer evolution as part of a new global structure is to be taken as a given.

Any new global order must have US-China relations as a central pillar. But we are still far from a G-2 world and it is not a forgone conclusion that it will ever be a G-2

world. I will deal with US-China relations in detail in a subsequent lecture. For now suffice to note only a few points.

First, US-China relations defy simple characterisation. China and the US are clearly not enemies. Neither can they be clearly said to be friends or natural partners. In this respect, US-China relations exemplify one of the most salient characteristics of post-Cold War major power relations: ambiguity. Profound interdependence of a new type coexists with equally profound strategic mistrust. The same is true of EU-Russia relations, Sino-Indian relations and Sino-Japanese relations.

Second, the main beneficiary of the end of the Cold War was not the “West” but China. Freed of the constraints imposed by its de facto membership of the US-led anti-Soviet alliance which it accepted out of necessity, but still largely a free-rider globally and so without onerous international responsibilities, China has since the 1990s been free to single-mindedly pursue its own interests. It has plugged itself more successfully than any other major developing country into the opportunities afforded by post-Cold War globalisation and thus rose with the results we all know.

Third, what will China do with its new status and power? That is not so clear, perhaps not even to China’s own leaders. As the main beneficiary of the existing order, China has no strong incentive to kick over the table. Neither has it any deep attachment to a system that is heir to the order it holds responsible for “a hundred years of humiliation”. Deng Xiaoping advised: “Hide your strength, bide your time”. Has that time now come? I would not rush to any conclusion one way or the other. President Xi Jinping has been more ambitious than any of his predecessors since Mao Zedong in articulating an international vision for China. But it is primarily an East Asian and Eurasian and not a global vision, and the vision lacks detailed resolution; still more a “China Dream” than a China plan. Nor has China been consistent in either the articulation of its interests or its actions. Even in East Asia where Chinese and US interests most directly intersect, I do not believe that either China or the US yet precisely knows what they want from each other, even as they seek a new accommodation with each other.

The world now finds itself in an indeterminate situation. There is no satisfied country powerful enough to maintain the existing global order by itself; nor is there any satisfied country that can offer consistent help to maintain the existing global order. There is no country that is simultaneously dissatisfied enough and powerful enough to change the existing global order. The uncertain interregnum that we now find ourselves in is likely to last a long time, perhaps decades and not just a few years.

Why was the promise of a new post-Cold War world order not fulfilled? One key factor was the US attitude in the immediate post-Cold War period, which proved self-defeating and made it more difficult than necessary for other major powers to swallow American leadership. The fundamental error was to misinterpret the meaning of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to confound these related but distinct events.

The Soviet Union undoubtedly failed. But did America or the “West” unambiguously win? What does “winning” in this context mean anyway? What is the “West” that allegedly won? In the rush of events these questions, among others, were insufficiently probed.

Almost two years separate the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. And the US or the “West” generally was not necessarily the key actor. Would the Cold War have ended in the way it did had Mikhail Gorbachev not been inclined to make the decisions he did with regard to the reunification of Germany and Soviet forces in East Europe? He could have resisted. But arguably Gorbachev had already concluded that his attempts to reform the Soviet system required the end of Cold War tensions, and the Soviet Union collapsed not because of the end of the Cold War but despite the end of the Cold War. Could Gorbachev’s reforms have succeeded, as reforms did in China’s essentially similar Leninist system, had Gorbachev’s vanity not caused him to foolishly confuse Western flattery for domestic support and pursue *glasnost* ahead of *perestroika*, fatally loosening the CPSU’s control at a crucial time? Would the Soviet Union have collapsed so suddenly if not

for the personal antagonism and rivalry between Boris Yeltsin and Gorbachev and the ambitions of the leaders of the constituent republics of the USSR, particularly the Ukraine?

There is of course no way of answering these questions definitively just as there is no way of dismissing them entirely, and that is the point. History is replete with contingencies and the consequences of human agency are intrinsically unpredictable and often more limited than the actors may have thought. The memoirs President George H. W. Bush co-authored with his National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, as well as other studies of the end of the Cold War, make clear that the decision to accept German reunification was not easy and Chancellor Kohl in effect forced the hands of America and his European partners. And from other sources, we now know that the Berlin Wall was breached because a nervous GDR spokesman bungled an answer at a press conference and in the resulting confusion no one knew what to do when hordes of East Germans rushed the Wall. In his memoirs, President Bush explicitly said that he was reluctant to force the break-up of the Soviet Union because of concern about control of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. In the end Scowcroft recalled: “We could actually do very little one way or the other to influence the outcome....”

That modest judgement was of course *ex post facto*. The memoirs were written when passions had cooled and published eight years after the Soviet Union collapsed. The attitude at the time was very different. In his 1992 State of the Union Address, President George H.W. Bush declared, “By the grace of God, America won the Cold War” and went on to describe a US-centric view of the future: “A world once divided into two armed camps now recognises one sole and pre-eminent power, the United States of America. And this they regard with no dread. For the world trusts us with power, and the world is right.”

Naked American triumphalism was given a superficial intellectual gloss by Francis Fukuyama’s infamous article in the neoconservative journal *The National Interest*, arguing that with America’s victory, “History” had ended. History took no notice of



Professor Fukuyama's theories went rolling bloodily along, manifesting itself among other ways, through genocide in Rwanda and vicious wars of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. Nothing deterred, the good Professor then wrote an entire book insisting that history had indeed ended in the special philosophical sense he meant, but the rest of us were insufficiently erudite to understand or notice. It was not until the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — at least in part inspired by universalist theories such as those he propounded — proved unwinnable, that Professor Fukuyama thought it prudent to write yet another book denying that he had ever been a neoconservative. He has since occupied himself writing hefty tomes on other subjects and, I believe, occasionally lecturing at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Making fun of the learned is akin to shooting fish in a barrel; not very sporting perhaps, but too tempting to resist. In any case, I can seldom resist the temptation. My purpose this time is however a serious one: To illustrate the stubborn persistence of mental frameworks, irrespective of their appropriateness and in defiance of empirical evidence. And despite the accumulated weight of evidence, the universalist impulse still lingers in more invidious ways and continues to have real effects on policy.

I have already alluded to the way it was used to justify an ill-considered war to effect regime change in Iraq. The 2003 war shook confidence in American leadership from which America has yet to fully recover. It precipitated a split in the Transatlantic Alliance and the EU. France and Germany led defiance of America; Blair's Britain enthusiastically embraced the war. Yet the same universalist impulse, lurking under the guise of humanitarian intervention, later led France and some other EU members of NATO into equally ill-considered bombing campaigns to try to change regimes, successfully in Libya, unsuccessfully in Syria.

If American allies were disquieted, what impact would it have had on countries like China, Russia, India and in the Middle-East and Southeast Asia?

Inappropriate mental frameworks may not matter very much when the international order is settled. They matter a great deal in times of international uncertainty when basic assumptions are shaken and the global order lacks clear definition. It is precisely in those times when the human mind, discombobulated by too much uncertainty, most desperately and thus uncritically seeks out frameworks that will give the comfort of familiarity and comprehension in the midst of disorienting flux.

Oftentimes the comfort is illusionary. Contemporary examples are slogans like “A New Cold War” or “Asia Rising” as well as theories like the so-called “Thucydides Trap” or “A Clash of Civilizations” or analogies with pre-First World War Europe. I believe they are all at best over-simplifications; at worse, dangerous nonsense.

The basic strategic challenge facing all of us in times of international uncertainty is: How to position ourselves to preserve the widest range of options and avoid being forced into invidious choices? This is more difficult than the basic Cold War challenge of choosing wisely. When the international structure lacks clear definition, when major power relationships defy simple characterisation and the major powers are themselves groping towards new accommodations with each other, we have no firm landmarks from which to take bearings and we can only navigate with reference to our own assessments. And if our assessments are based on false frameworks, we might well mistake rocks and shoals for safe passage.

Ladies & gentlemen, I have tried your patience for too long this evening. So let me conclude with a brief summary of what I have tried to achieve and what I hope to do in coming months. Today I have made very broad, but I hope not too rambling and superficial, survey of the international situation as I see it and the basic strategic challenge that arises from it. I intend to use the rest of the lectures in this series to examine some aspects of the international situation in detail. As you may have surmised from the examples of false frameworks that I listed, my focus will be on Asia, specifically East Asia, although I intend to make passing references to other regions as well.

My next lecture will be on US-China relations and will touch on Sino-Japanese relations as well. The lecture after will deal with our own region, Southeast Asia and the effects of US-China and other major power relations on ASEAN. The fourth lecture will examine the dominant Western framework — the alleged universality of certain values and political forms — which is not merely misleading but possibly dangerous. The final lecture will return home to discuss Singapore's readiness to cope with all these complexities. Once again, thank you for your patience.