

One Envoy's Take on China's Hardball Diplomacy

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BEIJING — Chinese diplomats are known to be tough, but it is rare to hear descriptions of how tough. A senior Singaporean diplomat has pulled back the veil and has talked about China's efforts to put smaller Asian countries in their place.

In a speech on Wednesday, the diplomat, Bilahari Kausikan, ambassador at large and policy adviser in Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who is known around Asia and in Washington for his candor, said that Chinese diplomats "perversely" often go out of their way to "accentuate rather than assuage anxieties."

While his address, delivered at the Institute of Policy Studies at the National University of Singapore, dealt mainly with the complex power relationships among China, the United States and Southeast Asian nations, and particularly with the contentious issue of the South China Sea, Mr. Kausikan could not resist citing some examples of China's heavy hand.

If a negotiation in Southeast Asia does not suit China, he said, its diplomats blame the other party. "It is our fault, and ours alone," he said, explaining China's usual attitude toward members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional group that includes Singapore and nine other countries.

He presented some examples. After Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore spoke about the disputed waters of the South China Sea at a 2012 summit meeting of Southeast Asian countries, a senior Chinese diplomat turned to a younger Singaporean counterpart, and said, "Silence is golden."

"If he meant to suggest that we were not entitled to a view on an important issue that affects our interests," Mr. Kausikan said, "he only undermined the credibility of China's claim to 'peaceful development.'"

Chinese diplomats get agitated when it comes to protocol involving their leaders, he said. For example, the Chinese ambassador to an Asian country demanded that Wen Jiabao, China's premier at the time, be allowed to stay at a hotel during a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nation even though that hotel was reserved by another delegation.

"The ambassador insisted on this, although the hotel allocated to Premier Wen was of equal quality," Mr. Kausikan recounted. "Did Premier Wen know where he was staying?"

Would he have cared if he had known? But the episode certainly left a deep impression on my counterpart, and no doubt on the Asean delegation that was forced to move as well.”

Chinese diplomats often express bewilderment that China’s generosity toward Southeast Asia — in trade and investment — does not engender gratitude, or at the least, diminish mistrust, Mr. Kausikan said. Chinese behavior, he suggested, is best understood as “passive-aggressive” and an effort to “force acceptance of China’s inherent superiority” as the natural order of Southeast Asian regional affairs.

The current dispute over the artificial islands China has constructed in the South China Sea is a case in point, he said. The islands are “inconsequential in military terms,” because, if necessary, they could easily be attacked and destroyed by the United States.

But, he added, they are a potent reminder to Southeast Asia that “China is a geographic fact whereas the U.S. presence in the South China Sea is the consequence of a geopolitical calculation.”

This is a point, Mr. Kausikan said, that China’s diplomats never tire of “seeding, in ways subtle or direct.”