

IPS-Nathan Lectures: Bilahari Kausikan on “An Age without Definition”

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Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan, the [2015/16 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore](#), began his series IPS-Nathan Lectures on 29 January 2016. The lectures, which will run monthly till May 2016, are collectively titled “Dealing with an Ambiguous World”. More than 200 people gathered on a Friday evening at the Guild Hall at NUS Kent Ridge Guild House to listen to the first lecture, on [“An Age without Definition”](#).

Mr Kausikan began his lecture by making several observations about the increasing complexity of domestic politics. Noting rising education levels, he said that this meant more Singaporeans would demand a greater voice in foreign policy, and that there was a need to develop “the ballast of an informed and realistic public understanding of foreign policy to keep us on a safe course.” He described current debates on domestic policies as often taking place without context “as if... this tiny island can be entirely insulated from what is happening around us.” This, he said, could lead to the loss of a sense of proportion. Legitimate frameworks premised on realistic, not hopeful, assessments of our external environment, are important in helping us understand the global order today, he said.

Post-Cold War Uncertainty

The Cold War — which began in 1947 and ended in 1991 — was the “basic mental framework” that shaped our understanding of the world for almost half a century, said Mr Kausikan. “The Cold War prescribed the parameters of the possible for us all with a stark and brutal clarity,” he said.

Singapore was lucky as it did not get tangled in the proxy wars of the superpowers during the Cold War, and even obtained certain advantages from their rivalries, he said. But all that has changed. In today’s post-Cold War context, global leadership is more diffused, and pressing issues such as environmental or human crises would not be dealt with adequately, which would perpetuate even more uncertainty, said Mr Kausikan.

With the dissolution of the Cold War structure, the United States became the predominant global power. But developments since then have shown that it cannot exercise leadership alone. There is also no “compelling reason” for other major powers— including the US’ allies — to accept US leadership all the time. Mr Kausikan added: “There is also no compelling reason for the American people to continue to shoulder the burdens and sacrifices of leadership.”



International Support for US Leadership

Mr Kausikan devoted a key portion of his speech to examining why several countries or groups of countries were not in the position to help the US bear its leadership role. He described the European Union (EU) as a project aimed at delivering a superior pan-European identity that transcended national borders, leveraging the ideals of universal rights and a generous welfare model. Critiquing this, he said that “any political project undertaken in defiance of human nature is bound to eventually fail.” The EU, he said, is a “prime example of the futility and danger of letting mental frameworks, however appealing or noble, outrun reality.” With its current fiscal and societal problems, the EU cannot be a global geopolitical force, he said. Similarly, America’s allies in East Asia such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand could only, at best, contribute within their own geography and only intermittently help elsewhere.

The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are united by their economic links with China, which trades more with each of the other four countries than the four countries amongst themselves. But these countries are bound by contradictory ambitions. Mr Kausikan questioned China’s support for India in their bid to become a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council, and whether or not Chinese and Russian ambitions in Central Asia could be reconciled. Russia was described as a “dissatisfied power” which had sufficient muscle to protect its core regional interests, but was not in a position to assume a global role.

In this uncertain age, Ambassador Kausikan described Singapore’s core challenge as positioning itself so as to retain as wide a range of options as possible, without being forced

into unduly compromised ones. Concluding the lecture, he said because there were no firm landmarks from which Singapore could take bearing, adopting false frameworks could have serious foreign policy implications for Singapore.



Question and Answer Session

“Do you have any comments on the shift of power towards the East?” an audience member asked, referencing Professor Kishore Mahbubani’s book *The New Asian Hemisphere*. Mr Kausikan acknowledged the obviousness of this shift, but also said that he disagreed with Professor Mahbubani on several points, saying that this would be addressed in both his second and third lectures of the series.

An audience member noted how successful Singapore’s foreign policy had been in the past decades despite its relative weakness as a nation, and observed that although we were in a stronger position today, the international environment might change drastically, catching us unawares if Singapore does not remain vigilant. Mr Kausikan agreed with the member’s sentiments, recalling how Singapore did not even have a Foreign Ministry in the years the nation became “unexpectedly independent”. Describing the Foreign Ministry as an “utter mess” when he joined in 1981, he described how the entire political division at the time only had 20 people; today, this would be the size of a division dealing with North East Asia. While neither pessimistic nor optimistic about Singapore’s chances, he noted that the Foreign Ministry today had to be aware of the challenges in order to deal with them, saying he would cover this in his last lecture.

A member of the audience asked if there was anything that Singaporeans should be more concerned about. “A small state must worry all the time over everything,” Mr Kausikan responded. Being *kiasu* and *kiasi* (colloquial terms used to describe a feeling of anxiety over missing out) are not bad in the case of a small country because the consequences of making a mistake can be drastic, he continued. “What I worry about is people not worrying — and there are signs of that,” he said, pointing to how some have in recent times questioned our vulnerabilities. While acknowledging that we were relatively developed by 1965, he pointed to how more developed countries than Singapore have since floundered.

“How did our Foreign Ministry react to the fall of the Berlin Wall?” someone in the audience asked. Mr Kausikan said it caught the ministry by surprise, saying that they did not know what to expect next. In retrospect, he said that this was a good thing. “For a small country, foreign policy is largely a series of improvisations,” he said. He described grand strategies as abstractive and not grounded with the happenings on a day-to-day basis, adding that the future cannot be predicted with any great certainty, and warning against a complacency that erodes “the nimbleness of mind and policy that improvisation to a rapidly world requires.”

One of the final questions of the night was on whether Singapore should, or could, always remain a sovereign country. The underlying assumption of Mr Kausikan’s lecture, said the audience member, was that Singapore would always be sovereign. But did he have a “most radical prediction” as to what could change this status, asked the member? Mr Kausikan described this as a good question. It was unlikely that Singapore’s formal sovereignty would be compromised through invasion or a takeover; it had a strong armed forces to “prevent such evil thoughts” from arising in others.

Nonetheless, he pointed out that a country could be formally sovereign but has its sovereignty “severely compromised” either because it does not have the wherewithal or is pulled apart by internal conflicts that are supported by external parties. For Singapore, the most serious threat to its sovereignty would arise from a loss of social cohesion, as it would rend different parts of the population apart, pulling them in different directions and making certain groups beholden to different countries outside Singapore. He ended off by saying: “I don’t take our sovereignty for granted... the object of our policy, all policies, is to keep our sovereignty.”

Andrew Yeo is a Research Assistant at IPS supporting the work of the S R Nathan Fellowship for the Study of Singapore. Watch the full video of Lecture I [here](#). Sign up for Lecture II on 25 February 2016 [here](#).

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