



IPS-Nathan Lectures: Bilahari Kausikan on
“US-China Relations: Groping Towards a New *Modus Vivendi*”

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Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan’s second IPS-Nathan lecture, titled “[US-China Relations: Groping Towards a New *Modus Vivendi*”](#), drew a crowd of 350 people. Held at NUS University Town, it was moderated by Professor Chan Heng Chee, Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. Professor Chan, also an Ambassador-at-Large at Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was Singapore’s Ambassador to the US from 1996 to 2012.

Ambassador Kausikan began his lecture by saying that US-China relations set the tone for East Asia and that there is stability in the region when their relationship is calm, while uneasiness sets in whenever the inverse is true. This relationship would be the central pillar of any new post-Cold War international order, he said. He described US-China relations as mature — pointing to how US President Richard Nixon’s visit to Beijing 44 years ago had transformed the global strategic landscape — and interdependent across various domains. However, US-China relations were also infused with deep strategic distrust, he said. Ambassador Kausikan spent the bulk of his lecture elaborating on the roots of the said distrust.

Strategic Distrust

“The most persistent of these misunderstandings in recent times is the notion that economic reform will lead to political reform,” Ambassador Kausikan explained. In China, “capitalism flourishes without democracy”, which is a notion the West cannot get around because of their misplaced belief in the universality of their political values, he later elaborated. While Western superiority is no longer explicitly stated due to a politically correct culture, Ambassador Kausikan pointed to western military interventions in North Africa and the Middle East as well as more benign attempts to interfere in domestic affairs as evidence of that implicit belief.

Another mischaracterisation of US-China relations has been one of a declining US set against the backdrop of a rising China. Ambassador Kausikan described this as a false dichotomy. While gross domestic product (GDP) growth in China moderates to

a lower rate of 6.5%, this additional growth still represents a figure as large as 80% of Indonesia’s GDP. For the US, while the goings-on in the political arena might lead some to believe in their decline, Ambassador Kausikan warned that “all who have underestimated American creativity and resilience have come to regret it,” observing that in most indices of power, the US was still in the lead. The most obvious of this is in the military realm, he said. China has learnt from the Soviet mistake of bankrupting itself in its attempts to match or surpass US military capability, but it does not have to do this anyway, as before too long, they will “reach a more symmetrical military equation with the US in East Asia,” he said.

“The essential priorities of both [US and China] are internal not external,” Ambassador Kausikan said, adding that this did not mean the two countries would “roll over and let the other tickle its tummy” either. He identified the most crucial of Chinese interests as the preservation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule; engaging in a military conflict with the US, which China would likely lose, would weaken the CCP’s grip on power. On the other hand, the US faces issues of middle-class insecurity and disenchantment with globalisation, which has propelled the political campaigns of both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, he observed.

Bearing these issues in mind, Ambassador Kausikan poured cold water on theories such as the “Thucydides Trap”, which holds that a confrontation between a rising power and a ruling power will end up in war. “But to treat someone as an enemy is to make an enemy and the theory of the ‘Thucydides Trap’ does not place sufficient emphasis on human agency — to recognise that there may be a trap is to go a long way towards avoiding it,” he said. For their part, American leaders, in their invocations of the universality of human and democratic rights, should be mindful that such pronouncements can have foreign strategic consequences, he said. Their penchant for the flourishing of their brand of human rights also pointed to how America has an inclusive culture that wanted everyone to be like it, he said. He described China, on the other hand, as having an exclusive culture that believes in its own superiority, a function he noted as a “very ancient and deeply ingrained feature of China’s approach to international relations”. This is also why China suffers a deficit in soft power, he added.



Question and Answer Session

Ambassador Chan kicked off the discussion by asking Ambassador Kausikan about China’s strategic ambitions for the Asia-Pacific, and whether he expected China to attempt to push out the US in the Asia-Pacific. Ambassador Kausikan replied that while there was no doubt that China would like to reclaim its historical central role in East Asia, it does not have the capability to do so. Further, China does not believe that entirely pushing the US out of Asia-Pacific would be in their strategic interests. This is because in that scenario, the possibility of Japan or South Korea going nuclear would be a “terrible complication to their [China’s] life,” he said.

Ambassador Chan asked if both US and China held similar frames of references when it came to relations with North Korea. Ambassador Kausikan said that both China and US were substantially within the same frame, but not entirely. He explained that neither North Korea nor China held the other with great affection, and that China was against North Korea’s nuclear programme — a common concern they shared with the US. However, he described the US, in their hopes for China to take action against North Korea, as being unable to understand that “common concerns are not the same as common interests”. This is because if China, as the largest communist country in the world, undermines the legitimacy of another

communist regime, it might cause immediate domestic implications for the CCP’s own rule, Ambassador Kausikan explained.

A member of the audience asked for Ambassador Kausikan’s views of the presidential election in the US, and the implications a Republican or Democrat President would have on foreign relations, if any. “I’m not a clairvoyant,” Ambassador Kausikan said to some laughter. However, he made the observation that there was the perception in East Asia and among some American Asia specialists that President Obama’s second term has been less engaged. Hence, whether or not the next President was Republican or Democrat, the person would be more assertive in his or her policies, said Ambassador Kausikan.

“I would like to ask for your opinion on the possibility of a more independent Japan emerging,” a student in the audience asked. As much as the US and Japan were aligned in terms of their stance on China, Japan was increasingly terse about the US presence in Okinawa and, just like the US and China, Japan has its own brand of exceptionalism, the student elaborated. Ambassador Kausikan disagreed, saying that how the Okinawans felt about US presence in their space might not be representative of how the Japanese in general felt about US presence in their country. Acknowledging that there were still issues to be ironed out between the US and Japan, Ambassador Kausikan said that these were mainly economic issues and that they were taking place within the framework of an alliance.

At the end of the lecture, both Ambassador Kausikan and Ambassador Chan emphasised that observers should pay more attention to the domestic issues of both the US and China. Pointing to current social trends as well as recent recessions, wars in the Middle East, globalisation and job displacements, Ambassador Chan said that these contribute towards the disconnect happening between the people and the government of the US, and that it was something we should all bear in mind. “I don’t think either Xi Jinping or Obama wakes up wondering how to deal with the other country,” said Ambassador Kausikan, concluding that “these big countries are difficult enough to govern by themselves and as I’ve said in passing, their essential preoccupations are internal.”

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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