

## Dealing with Complexity; Navigating Ambiguity

*Remarks by Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan at Session 1 – Geopolitics: Preparing for Multipolarity at the [Singapore at 50: What Lies Ahead? \(SG50+\) Conference](#) on 3 July 2015, Singapore*

Is the world really evolving towards multipolarity? No one can predict the future, but on the available evidence, I doubt it.

Clearly the unipolar delusions of the immediate post-Cold war era are over. Yet only the US still has the capability to consistently act strategically on a global scale. At the same time, events over the last decade or so, particularly in the Middle East, have demonstrated that US power does not automatically translate into influence, especially when exercised unilaterally. The US cannot act effectively when it acts alone but it needs to form coalitions, as it did during the Cold War.

The Cold War, despite all its dangers, had a coherent structure. It was the danger posed by the Soviet Union that compelled acceptance of US leadership no matter what doubts countries not in the Soviet camp might have harboured about American policies— even China after 1972 in effect accepted US leadership – and thereby imposed some structure on the global system. The paradox of our times is that while only the US retains the capability for global leadership, there is no longer any clear strategic imperative to compel acceptance of US leadership, and without a clear strategic imperative, the American people too, or at least a substantial section of them, now seem reluctant to shoulder the burdens of leadership. Hence the confusions and incoherence that today characterises the international system. But incoherence is not multipolarity.

Who is capable of restoring coherence to the global system by exercising global leadership? Europe? Perhaps in economic terms when it sets its house in order. But strategically Europe is irrelevant. It's Common Foreign and Security Policy is at best an aspiration; at worse, a joke. Europe has been unable to influence events even within its own borders: in the Balkans in the mid-1990s, and more recently in the Ukraine. In both these cases, and there are other examples, it was the US that pulled Europe's chestnuts out of fires that Europe had – in fits of hubris – kindled but could not control. The lesson is that there is no "soft power" unless you have "hard power".

Who else? The BRICS? The term was first coined by a fund manager as a marketing device to part the unwary from their money. It is not a self-evidently viable geopolitical concept. And notwithstanding the web of

summits and other meetings they have since woven – and notwithstanding even the bank that they have established – I am not yet convinced that it is a viable geopolitical concept. What unites the BRICS except a vague dissatisfaction with the established order and a desire for a global role or at least global recognition? But the sources of their dissatisfaction and hence their aspirations are not identical or even similar. In any case, aspiration must be matched by capability. With one exception – China – the BRICS are primarily significant as regional powers and are able to act globally only sporadically. Even China is still somewhat ambivalent about its global role.

At present, it is perhaps more useful to think of the future in terms of regional structures rather than global structures. The western shaped and dominated global system of the last 200 years or so – a system that in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was multipolar and bipolar for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – is undoubtedly in transition. Less clear, indeed opaque, is transition to what? It is pointless to speculate on an unknowable future. But the shape of regions can already be glimpsed. Certainly our region, East Asia, is going to be bipolar, structured by US-China relations.

This does not mean that other major East Asian countries – Japan, the ROK, Australia and Russia – and their relationships with each other and other East Asian countries are inconsequential. They have their own importance and complexities. But in macro-strategic terms they are at present only adjuncts to either the US or China. Clearly their significance is not on the same level as the US or China.

Post-World War II East Asia was very largely an American creation. But there is now a consensus – shared by American friends and allies and by China too – that while the US presence is still a very necessary, indeed irreplaceable, condition to ensure stability for East Asian growth, it is no longer a sufficient condition for stability and needs to be supplemented – supplemented not supplanted – by some new architecture. There are various experiments at elaborating supplementary architecture and they largely define day-to-day East Asian multilateral diplomacy. But all still are only that - experiments. Whatever the eventual outcome, US-China relations will certainly be the central pillar of any new East Asian system.

The US and China are now groping towards a new *modus vivendi* with each other and with other countries in East Asia. It will be decades before they reach a new equilibrium. In the meantime, Singapore, in common with all other countries in East Asia, will have to endure the trials and tribulations that are inevitable when strategic adjustments of this magnitude are underway. The challenge is to position ourselves so

as to preserve maximum autonomy and avoid being forced into invidious choices.

This does not mean not taking positions on issues that affect our interests. Avoiding taking positions is to surrender autonomy and we must be prepared to clearly state and defend our interests on such issues such as the South China Sea which is becoming something of a proxy for the major power adjustments that are afoot. It does however mean leaving open the widest range of options and maintaining the best possible relationships with all the major powers, even as we take positions that are in our national interests.

Can we cope? We have coped quite well so far and are now in something of a sweet spot in our relations with all major powers. If we mess it up, we will have no one to blame but ourselves. There is no reason why we cannot continue to cope provided that we meet three conditions.

The first condition is to understand the processes underway between the US and China accurately. Misunderstanding can be dangerous. The US-China relationship is complex, difficult to encapsulate in a single phrase or sentence. They are characterised both by profound interdependence and deep strategic mistrust. Interdependence does not erase the possibility of conflict but limits it, and gives both parties a strong incentive to try and avoid conflict. The chief risk is conflict by accident and not war by design. Neither the US nor China is looking for trouble. They need and want a stable relationship. But at the same time neither is going to easily concede to the other and rivalry is an intrinsic and inescapable part of any major power relationship. Competition between the US and China is thus inevitable as they try to establish a new *modus vivendi*.

The dynamic of US-China competition cannot be reduced to simplistic dichotomies between a “rising power” and a “declining power” or between a “status quo power” and a “revisionist power”. China is certainly rising but the US is not in obvious decline. And like all big countries, both the US and China are simultaneously and selectively upholders of the status quo when convenient and revisionist when it suits them. To oversimplify this complex reality can lead to miscalculation in what will become an increasingly complicated and unpredictable environment. Again, Cold War clarity is gone and will never be re-established. During the Cold war there was never any doubt who was friend and who foe, irrespective of which side we were on or even if we pretended to be non-aligned. Now matters are far more ambiguous. China evokes anxieties in countries on its periphery. But no

country in East Asia – not even Japan or Vietnam who have very complicated relationships with China – considers China an enemy. And while the US is a friend, it is sometimes a very demanding and officiously intrusive friend. More fundamentally - and problematically for those of us who must adjust ourselves to their adjustments – neither the US nor China really yet knows what they want.

Even as it tries to strengthen its traditional alliance system and make new friends, the US knows that it must reach some accommodation with China and enlist its help to maintain order. But what sort of order? China wants to reclaim some of its historical role in East Asia. But how much and how? China is such a central node in the world economy that the US might as well try to contain itself as contain China. The US is so much a part of East Asia that China might as well try to displace itself from the region as displace the US. And without the US presence, China might well have to deal with a nuclear Japan. So the US does not yet know how much help to ask for and what price to pay for help and China does not yet know how much help to offer and what price to ask for its help.

We must deal with these complexities without being disheartened or intimidated by them. Being in the midst of US-China competition will not always be comfortable. But it is precisely the existence of competition that holds out the possibility of manoeuvre to preserve autonomy. US-China collusion will be a whole lot more uncomfortable.

The possibility of US-China collusion is not a paranoid fantasy. In 1981, at an International Conference held at the UN to discuss the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, an issue arose between ASEAN and China. The question was what should happen in Cambodia after the Vietnamese withdrew. China wanted the return of the Khmer Rouge. ASEAN wanted elections to allow the Cambodian people to determine their own rulers. Singapore took a particularly strong stand on this. The US, concerned about its relationship with China, singled out Singapore for special pressure. An Assistant Secretary of State threatened our Foreign Minister with “blood on the floor” if we did not relent. We stood firm and the US eventually changed its position. But the lesson was clear: when great powers reach agreements, they generally try to make someone else pay the price. What happened in the past could well happen again, even over such currently fraught issues as the South China Sea where in the long run a more symmetrical US-China naval equation must develop and compel a recalibration of the way in which the US calculates its interests.

The second condition is to retain our ability to analyse our environment and calculate our interests clinically and then pursue our interests and respond to developments with nimbleness and nuance. The key factors that might degrade this capability – which has been the most important characteristic of our foreign policy to date – are all domestic.

Partisan politics is contaminating foreign policy. Early signs – faint but unmistakable – are already evident. One opposition party has attempted to use our Middle East policy and relations with our neighbours for political advantage. Some anti-establishment “activists” have tried to use our approach towards ASEAN integration to fan public disquiet over foreign labour. These attempts failed because they were clumsily executed and the public is still generally generally not too interested in foreign policy. But they are bound to continue and will probably intensify. No country has ever been able to entirely insulate foreign policy from domestic politics, and as our politics grows more “normal”, I see no reason why we should be the exception.

As Singapore’s political landscape grows more crowded with civil society organisations and advocacy groups as well as traditional political parties jostling to shape public opinion and government policy, opportunities for foreign interference also multiply. No matter how fervently they may swear otherwise, major powers are always going to import their completion for influence into our domestic space – legitimately by diplomacy but also by covert means. They have done so in the past, they are doing so now – why do you think foreign groups are getting involved in the Roy Ngerng and Amos Yee affairs? I doubt it is merely out of the goodness of their hearts. And they will never cease to do so because such behaviour is embedded in an international system of sovereign states. Unfortunately foreign powers will always find witting or unwitting collaborators among our compatriots.

To deal with these two factors we need a better educated public. To rely on continued public indifference to foreign policy is unsustainable and undesirable, a long term liability that renders us vulnerable to political charlatans and confidence tricksters. Debate over foreign policy is not necessarily a bad thing if conducted within common, non-partisan understandings of what is and is not possible for a small country located in Southeast Asia rather than some more salubrious region. An educated public is also the best inoculation against foreign attempts at domestic interference, although there is no substitute for an alert and efficient Internal Security Department.

Common understandings evolve organically in societies with long shared histories. But we are only fifty years old; the challenges are immediate

and we do not have the luxury of time. We need to hot-house and nurture such understandings. But unfortunately we do not do a good job of national education. Our national education system is elaborate but ritualised and in its present form arguably provokes as much cynicism as it fosters understanding. We are paying the price for deemphasising the study of our own history in our schools. I understand steps are being taken to rectify the situation. It will be years before their effect is felt; still the problem is recognised.

But the most subtle, sensitive and perhaps serious vulnerability is within our public service and is far more difficult to deal with. How we position ourselves within the swirls and eddies of major power politics – whether wisely or disastrously – will not only be the consequence of big decisions consciously taken by identifiable individuals or institutions at specific points of time and space. Equally or perhaps even more important, will be the gradual, almost imperceptible, accretion of many small actions across a wide spectrum of policy domains taken unaware of the larger accumulated import of day-to-day seemingly routine decisions.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, foreign policy cannot be the sole responsibility of the Foreign Ministry or any country's top leadership. The international agenda is today too broad and the boundaries between foreign and domestic policies more porous than ever before. Yet the cast of mind and the instincts needed to deal with an ever more complexly ambiguous external environment are not widely distributed within our public service outside the Foreign Ministry and a few other Ministries and departments. These instincts and modes of thought cannot be taught; they can only be acquired through experience. But the manner in which our civil service, particularly in its more rarefied reaches, is currently conceptualised and structured devalues these modes of thought and raises barriers against the accumulation of relevant experience. While there have been some hesitant steps to mitigate the situation, whether they will be sufficient to meet the future challenges is an open question and such is internal resistance that I suspect that the problem may not even be adequately acknowledged.

The third condition that must be met if we are to successfully navigate the more challenging international environment that lies ahead is regional. ASEAN has been an extremely useful – indeed indispensable – tool for Singapore, as it has for all its members. Among other things, ASEAN has ensured a modicum of cohesion in a region where this is not to be taken for granted, served as an influence multiplier and has provided a buffer against the wilder vicissitudes of major power politics. ASEAN is not a perfect organisation. But its limitations derive from the

Southeast Asian reality that we cannot avoid and must work with even as we try to change it. Too much criticism of ASEAN amounts to scolding a goat for not being a horse or wishing that pigs might fly – singularly futile uses of time.

The interests of the US, China and other major powers intersect in Southeast Asia. ASEAN was inspired to call this “centrality”. The major powers have been kind enough not to publically demur and have found ASEAN-established platforms occasionally useful as a secondary means of ordering their relationships with each other and other countries in the region. ASEAN’s ability to continue to play even such a minimal role depends on our ability to continue to integrate. Southeast Asian countries are in between two leviathans: India and China. As these two giant economies grow, if ASEAN does not integrate, the lands in between will either be torn apart by the gravitational forces exerted by the giants or squashed into irrelevance as they expand to occupy all the political and economic space.

The core of integration must be economic. By the end of this year, we would have completed one phase of economic integration. Our targets for this phase are modest and while we will not meet all of them, we will meet enough of them to credibly declare victory for this phase. But we cannot stop because our geopolitical circumstances will not change. Thereafter we will have to take more difficult decisions in the context of a more complex regional environment and, more importantly, at a time when several key ASEAN members are in the midst of domestic political changes which in some cases are of a systemic nature. The jury is still out on whether we will be able to reach consensus on a credible post-2015 integration agenda.

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