

*\*\*\*This is an edited transcript which was prepared by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). The full off-the-cuff remarks by Mr Bilahari Kausikan are available in video format on the IPS website: <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips>.\*\*\**

### **Panel III: Singapore and the Region**

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Singapore is in Southeast Asia. This is a geographical fact. But although we are “in-Southeast Asia”, we are not always “of-Southeast Asia” — and we cannot be. There are three key factors that make Singapore something of an anomaly in Southeast Asia and prescribe why we must always be something of an outlier in Southeast Asia even though we are part of the region.

The first factor is an ethnic one. Singapore is an ethnic Chinese majority sovereign state, in fact, the only one in the world outside Greater China. But Southeast Asia is a region where the Chinese are not always a welcomed minority. Secondly, although we are an ethnic Chinese majority state, Singapore is organised horizontally on the basis of multiracial meritocracy. Now, multiracial meritocracy in Singapore is not perfect, but there is no perfection to be found on earth. It is nevertheless a principle that we take seriously. And we live in a region where every other state is either formally or informally organised on a very different principle, and that principle is an ethnic or religious hierarchy — or both. You know all the examples.

In Malaysia, ethnic hierarchy is enshrined as a formal part of the Constitution - Article 153. Indonesia's formal organising ideology is *Pancasila*, which is, in theory, horizontal but the informal hierarchy of “*pribumi*” over “*non-pribumi*” is the political reality. You can say the same of almost any other country. In Thailand, it is the ethnic Thai Buddhist over the Malay Muslim in the South. In Myanmar, it is the ethnic Burman Buddhist over the Rohingya and other minorities. And this is true of the broader region in Southeast Asia. In China, it is clearly a hierarchy of the Han over the non-Han. Even in Japan, which is a liberal democracy, it is clearly a hierarchy of the ethnic Japanese over, say, the Japanese citizens of Korean or Chinese descent.

Together, these two factors have historically led to Singapore being regarded with a certain degree of suspicion by other countries in the region. The suspicion at one time was that we were a “Third China”, and other countries projected a great deal of their suspicions of China and their attitudes towards their own ethnic Chinese minorities on Singapore. So, after Independence, the Singapore government devoted a great deal of energy and effort trying to dispel this perception of Singapore. I think as far as the governments of Southeast Asia are concerned, we have been largely successful. I do not think any *government* in Southeast Asia thinks of us as a Third China, and they understand that there is now a distinct Singapore identity, separate from the various ethnic identities. But those are the attitudes of the governments. I am less confident that the attitudes of the *populations* of other Southeast Asian countries have changed. Perhaps they will in time, but I do not think we are there yet.

At the same time, there is a complication here. The attitudes of Southeast Asia towards China has changed. It is no longer one of unmitigated suspicion. But the change has not been complete or entire. Some of you may know of a recent ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute survey that revealed that, while it is broadly acknowledged that China is an important and influential actor in Southeast Asia, this perception coexists with significant scepticism about China. What this means is that the emergence and the acceptance of a distinct Singapore identity separate from the ethnic composition of Singapore, is not to be taken for granted and has to be maintained by the conscious efforts of policy. In fact, I think this is so even internally within Singapore, because — do not forget — we are only 54 years old, and that is not a very long time in the history of a country. Singapore is a young nation, and while acceptance of a distinct Singapore identity is real and an important development, I suspect this identity is still relatively shallow and therefore malleable.

A further complication is the fact that US-China relations have clearly entered into a new long-term phase of heightened strategic competition. This adds significantly to the complexity of the region and the complexity of countries’ decisions on how to position themselves in the midst of this great power competition — the obvious manifestation of which is the trade war. But the term “trade war” is something of a misnomer because trade is an instrument; the objective is strategic competition. Another factor that cautions against taking a distinct Singapore identity for granted, is the resurgence of what is generally known as populism, but I think it is more accurately described as the politics of nativism or indigeneity in key countries in Southeast Asia, and this is part of a global trend that shows no sign of abating. By the way, Singapore, too, is not unaffected by this trend, although what we have seen here is, as yet, a fairly mild form of it.

Now, the third factor that makes Singapore unique in Southeast Asia is the fact that we are a city-state with no natural hinterland within our sovereign territory. Now, a small city-state cannot take its international relevance or even its regional relevance

for granted. Relevance is an artefact that has to be created by human endeavour and, having been created, has to be maintained by human endeavour. What does this mean? What is the implication of having to create and sustain relevance for yourself? What is the implication of being something of an anomaly in Southeast Asia?

It means that, while Singapore is in Southeast Asia as a geographical fact, we must always look beyond Southeast Asia to make a living and to ensure our security. This is a strategic imperative. Another way of stating the same point is that we have to be different. We have to be extraordinary. We have to leverage our difference, in order to be extraordinary. We cannot be just like any other country in Southeast Asia for the simple reason that if we were just like any other country in Southeast Asia, why would anybody want to deal with us, rather than our larger neighbours who are endowed with natural resources?

We have to acknowledge that there is a certain tension between these imperatives — between the imperative to be extraordinary and the fact that we are in Southeast Asia. If we were just like anybody else, we would soon find ourselves at risk of irrelevance. Being extraordinary does not necessarily make us universally loved, but it cannot be helped. That is the existential condition of being Singaporean.

Now, what are we to do about this? First, the management of these complexities depends first of all on ourselves, to maintain what makes us unique and, in particular, how we organise ourselves as a society on the basis of multiracial meritocracy. If we can do that, I think we can manage the other complexities. If we cannot do that, we are done for. Do not forget: we live in an era where identities of various kinds — “nativisms” of different kinds and “indigeneities” of different kinds — are being asserted globally and I do not see why we should be exempted from these global trends.

The second point is that ASEAN is a vital and irreplaceable means of managing the tensions that I mentioned. There is no substitute. Pak Marty Natalegawa here has written a very good book on ASEAN — *Does ASEAN Matter? A View from Within* — which I commend to all of you. All of you should read it. Pak will no doubt speak in greater detail on ASEAN, as he is, in many ways, Mr ASEAN. I leave that to him.

I will just end by saying that, while ASEAN is, and must remain, central to Singapore's foreign policy, it is a tool, one of many. There are things that ASEAN can do and does very well, but there are some things that ASEAN cannot do or will have limitations in what it is able to do. We should never lose sight of this fact. A vital tool, an irreplaceable tool, but it is still one tool. It is not a panacea for all the ills in the world, all the ills of Singapore, and all the ills of the region. It would be dangerous for Singapore and Singaporeans to confuse a very useful and vital tool for some kind of magic nostrum that cures everything. Thank you.

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