

It's Complicated: Status of US-China Relations

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Something both the US and China share is that they consider themselves to be exceptional countries. This, according to Bilahari Kausikan, Ambassador-at-Large and Policy Adviser in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

However America is an 'inclusive' culture that believes the world would be a better place if other countries were to become like it. China on the other hand, is an 'exclusive' culture, and thinks other countries could never reach its superiority.

This is said to be a reason why China faces problems with other countries. Kausikan believes China will always suffer a deficit of soft power, and evoke resentment from others.

While neither US nor China is looking for a fight with each other, frictions and tensions will continue in the time of uncertainty. Kausikan explains however, that the essential priorities of both countries are internal, not external.

War, he adds, is highly improbable between US and China. If they do happen to go to war, it would be "conflict by accident, and not war by design."

Kausikan was speaking at the 2015/16 IPS-Nathan Lectures titled "*Dealing with an Ambiguous World*". The second edition out of the series is centred on US-China relations.

The key interest of the Chinese is the preservation of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule. "Beijing knows that win, lose or draw — and the most likely outcome of any military conflict with the US is a loss — the CCP's grip on power will be placed in grave jeopardy."

As for America, he mentions the perception that the second Obama administration was seemingly less engaged and weaker than the first Obama administration. Whoever wins this current election, Republican or Democrat, will probably have to talk and act tougher. The new President, however, "can't ignore the national mood which is not for more wars of choice or adventure."

The relations between US-China should not be seen as a "Clash of Civilizations" either because there is no such thing as pure traditional civilisations anymore. The "Clash of Civilizations" will not be with the US, but "between a part of the Islamic world and all else who have to whatever degree adapted to the western definition of modernity, including most Muslims."

As for the implications of the tensions between the two countries on East Asia, both US and China will remain essential parts of the East Asian strategic equation. Kausikan says for US to contain China, and for Beijing to exclude US from East Asia, would be a futile attempt on both their parts.

With the flair expected of a Kausikan lecture, he fielded questions during the Question and Answer segment with sharp honesty, often drawing laughs from the crowd.

Describing North Korea as a “theocratic country based on the religion of Kim,” he says “North Korea has one weapon that the Chinese have no answer to — that weapon is to threaten to die.”

Moderator Chan Heng Chee, Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) then brought up the concern of refugees coming across to China.

Kausikan cut in immediately saying, “refugees you can deal with, at most you shoot them all or you push them back. But to undermine another communist regime, it will give evil thoughts to your own people.”

Speaking in jest he said what North Korea really wants is a peace treaty — and “the love and affection”— of the US.