

REMARKS BY PROFESSOR JOSEPH LIOW, 13TH S R NATHAN FELLOW

Minister Chan Chun Sing, Minister of Education

Mr Janadas Devan, Director, IPS

Distinguished Guests, Ladies, and Gentlemen

A very good afternoon to all of you. Thank you, Minister Chan, for agreeing to be the GOH for this event, for taking time off your busy schedule to come and launch this book, and for your very thoughtful remarks which was just delivered.

Thank you also, to IPS, and to Director Janadas, for inviting me to be the 13th S R Nathan Fellow. It was indeed a great honour, and like I said at my first lecture, 13 will be my favourite number from now on!

I am particularly thrilled about this book launch. Not because it is my first, but because the book is published under the auspices of a Fellowship named after Mr S R Nathan, who I had the great honour and privilege of working for in the early days of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at Nanyang Technological University. By the way, Mr Nathan would have celebrated his 100th birthday just a couple of days ago. So Happy 100th Birthday, Mr Nathan!

As the IPS–Nathan Fellow, I was asked to deliver three lectures. I will not attempt to summarise them, since IPS has kindly compiled them into the book that is about to be launched. But let me share something of the thought process I went through as I prepared those lectures.

My three lectures were organised under the overarching theme of *Navigating Uncertainty: Our Region in an Age of Flux*. The intent was to unpack the drivers of uncertainty that Singapore faces today insofar as our external environment is concerned, to better understand the sources of these uncertainties, to critique the intellectual and policy paradigms through which they can be analysed, and to reflect on how Singapore can not only survive but thrive under these conditions.

The lectures began with a discussion of US–China rivalry, a topic that commands immense interest in Singapore, where there are a great number of differing opinions on the matter.

This escalation of great power competition has cast a shadow over institutions of global governance, and precipitated anxieties about the resilience of the so-called post-World War II US-led global order. This should not be surprising given that to many, the global order is in many respects basically an expression of — and indeed, some would argue, an extension of — American power.

As a consequence, the idea of global order has become heavily contested today, in terms of whose interests it really represents, and the values ascribed to it. Because some of these values are perceived to privilege the interests of advanced economies, most of which are found either in the Trans-Atlantic region or Western Europe, it should hardly be surprising that they have encountered resistance from many quarters in the so-called Global South: representing majority of the world's population, and that emerged from under the yoke of colonialism not too long ago.

As the arc of history bends, we find ourselves entering a world that is becoming fundamentally different from what many of us have grown familiar and comfortable with. In the West, strategy is thought of in terms of the game of chess. In China, it is thought of in terms of Weiqi (or Go). But how do you strategise a virtual, multi-screen, multi-player world that is real-time, driven by AI, AR, and VR technologies, where old rules are being challenged and undermined, and new ones yet to be determined? The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci famously said: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters.” A bit melodramatic perhaps — Gramsci is, after all, a Marxist — but also not too far from the truth.

My lectures were delivered in October and November last year. This was the time when the Russia-Ukraine War was being fought to a stalemate, tragedy unfolded in Gaza, and the political temperature was rising in cross-straits relations. It set me wondering about Southeast Asia, and the politics of identity that has always been a feature of our region's social, cultural, and historical landscape.

Now Southeast Asia is in many ways a thriving region today — stable, secure, prosperous. But lest we forget, barely 50 years ago, it was commonplace to hear people talking about Southeast Asia as a “Region in Revolt”.

As fairly new postcolonial states still grappling with conceptions of nationhood, identity-based faultlines remain a reality, and they bear heavily on how local, national, and geopolitics unfolds.

The Scottish nationalist philosopher Andrew Fletcher once wrote: “Let me write the songs of the nation, I care not who writes its laws.” His point is that the essence of a nation’s values and outlook derive not from its laws, or even its political processes, but from the deep reservoirs of culture and identity that inform perceptions of who “we” are. While identities are — of course — never ossified, they do tend to endure, and when provoked, elicit emotive responses. And when they change, they create forces that can strengthen or weaken societies. This is why I also felt compelled to address issues of race, language, and religion in Southeast Asia, in relation to wider geopolitical forces that bear on them in ways that unite but also divide.

Anyway, all this is discussed in much greater detail in the book, which I hope you will enjoy reading. And if not, at least I can assure it will help you with your insomnia.

I would like to express my gratitude to all of you once again, for attending this book launch. I also want to thank members of my family for being here today — my wife Ai Vee, and daughter Megan — seated over there. My son Euan is busy serving the nation. To my family, thank you for putting up with me, and for always reminding me to keep it real! Have a good weekend everyone, thank you!