

## China 'trying to become the central Asian power'

**Cheong Suk-Wai**

***The Straits Times***, 31 March 2016

China's continued ratcheting up of its presence in the South China Sea is a bid to reassert itself as the central power in Asia, ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan said yesterday.

The crux of the matter was that "China must give the appearance of recovering lost territory" because "for the past century, the legitimacy of any Chinese government has depended on its ability to defend China's sovereignty and preserve its borders", he said in his third lecture as the Institute of Policy Studies' S R Nathan Fellow.

China's territories had included Mongolia and Siberia in the past.

But as history has marched on, China can now lay claim only to outlying islands and outcrops such as the Paracels, the Spratlys and Macclesfield Bank, he said, stressing at the outset that the views at the lecture were entirely his own.

With the United States emphasising that it intends to remain an East Asian power, Mr Kausikan said China was merely trying to nudge the US a little more off-centre in the region. The challenge for China was how to do so without "provoking responses from the US and Japan that could jeopardise Chinese Communist Party rule".

The US, on the other hand, had always to find ways to "accommodate" China while assuaging its allies' concerns about its overtures to China without, as he put it, "stumbling into conflict".

And the view that the US was trying to contain China by forging the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with allies in the Asia-Pacific, including Japan and South Korea, was "arrant rubbish". This was especially so as most TPP signatories were also part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a Chinese initiative.

Taking questions from the audience later, he noted the long continuity in US foreign policy of having a regional presence and suggested that if US establishment stalwart Hillary Clinton won the upcoming presidential polls, that policy would likely not change. He could not say the same for Republican candidate Donald Trump, though.

Still, the South China Sea was "the issue where the parameters of US-China competition and their interests are most clearly defined", and so the world would have to watch developments closely.

With both powers declaring Asean "strategic" in its regional manoeuvres, the grouping was squarely between the two competing powers, especially since the US prized freedom of navigation through the area. Last month's Sunnylands summit between US and five Asean leaders was yet another instance of the US "courting" Asean.

But he cautioned Asean from being "mesmerised" into thinking it was now the darling of great powers. "We used to speak of Asean in the driver's seat. The person in the driver's seat is sometimes only the chauffeur," he said, noting that the US and China treated Asean forums as "secondary" and a means to conduct talks between themselves.

But it did not help that China's diplomats had a "passive-aggressive style" towards their Asean counterparts. There were examples aplenty of such shabby treatment of Asean, including working "glacially" with the latter on a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.

All that resulted in a "trust deficit" between China and Asean, which China's President Xi Jinping acknowledged in his Singapore Lecture here last year.

Mr Kausikan said the US and China had more interests in common than is popularly supposed, and so it would not be inconceivable if they became allies in future.

### **'Asean faces possible storms'**

Many observers tend to deride Asean as a talk shop, but in the regional grouping's 49 years, it has had some significant achievements, said veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan yesterday at the National University of Singapore.

And while Asean was "still not sufficiently understood" by many, he noted that its members had not gone to war or been embroiled in the conflicts of great powers, despite the "visceral" differences among them.

But he said there might be storm clouds looming over Asean.

Thailand and Malaysia, to his mind, might even see "systemic change". Indonesia had yet to "reach a stable post-Suharto equilibrium" and was still "an incoherent system seized with a somewhat petulant economic nationalism". Myanmar had just voted for leaders with "no experience with governance", and the Philippines, heading for a presidential election soon, was "not renowned for policy continuity".

But he felt Asean should work together on infrastructure projects, perhaps via public-private partnerships with, among others, the US, Japan, South Korea and India. This would "serve as a crucial complement to the maritime capability-building programmes some of these countries have started for Asean".

To a question later by DBS chief Piyush Gupta on how far Asean would progress as an economic community, Mr Kausikan said: "Nobody knows until you try." He said earlier the "easy things" for economic integration had already been done but establishing a common market and production platform would be harder.