

Navigating a global order lacking in clarity

The world is in a state of greater than usual uncertainty, Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan says in his first IPS-Nathan Lecture, and Singapore's strategic challenge is how to ensure the widest range of choices for itself. Below is an edited excerpt of his speech.

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For almost half a century after the end of World War II, our fundamental understanding of the world, the basic mental framework that all states held in common, was the Cold War. It established the essential processes of international relations for us all.

Despite its dangers, and they were great, the Cold War had one virtue: a clearly defined structure. The very danger gave the structure sharp resolution. Clarity and danger created order. The early Cold War saw several United States-Soviet Union crises in the Caribbean,

Berlin and the Middle East. But direct superpower confrontation soon proved too dangerous and by the mid-1960s, their competition largely manifested itself through proxies in peripheral regions where defeat or victory engaged no vital interests of the superpowers.

The result was what some scholars have called "The Long Peace". This was, of course, peace between the superpowers. It was not very peaceful for those careless, reckless, foolish or unfortunate enough to become proxies. But for prudent or lucky states on the periphery - and prudence creates its own luck - there was never very much doubt about how to position themselves within the Cold War structure to avoid getting entangled in superpower proxy wars and perhaps even obtain some modest advantage from the rivalry. Singapore was among them.

That clarity of choice is gone and will not be recreated. We now have danger - although of a lesser magnitude - without clearly defined structure. No one really knows what will, or can, replace the Cold War structure. It has been a quarter of a century since the Berlin Wall came down and the USSR imploded, yet we can still only define our times by reference to the age that preceded it: We still call this "the post-Cold War". We live in an age without definition.

There was a brief post-Cold War moment when one country seemed to hold all the levers of the world. The western side of the Cold War structure was entirely an American creation. The US and the Soviet Union both claimed to embody universal values. Once the latter was discredited and its Cold War structure dissolved, there seemed no alternative to American-led institutions, American power, American values and American ideas. History had ended. The economic analogue was "The Great Moderation", whereby the genius of American economists had reduced the complexity of economic systems and human behaviour to neat mathematical formulas and harnessed the market to once and for all tame the business cycle.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, these delusions were dispelled by the failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the near meltdown of Wall Street.

US President Barack Obama rode the backlash into the White House. The general view regards his election as the vindication of American values. Perhaps. But I take the contrarian view that the very improbability of Mr Obama's election reflects disillusionment with the post-Cold War definition of American values and a groping after a different and more authentic definition. This, at least in part, explains the resonance of Mr Obama's campaign slogan of "change". But expectations were so high that he was almost bound to disappoint. The unseemly spectacle of the current Republican primary campaign suggests that the search for a new definition is still ongoing with a more hysterical tone.

Without global structure, global leadership is diffused. Without global leadership, many urgent international issues - take your pick: anything from climate change to proliferation to refugees to pandemics - will be left unresolved or dealt with only suboptimally, enhancing the uncertainties.

Enter the Group of 20 (G-20). At the G-20 Pittsburgh Summit in 2009, Mr Obama announced that the G-20 would replace the Group of Eight as the "premier forum" for international economic cooperation. The significance of his statement went beyond finance and economics. In effect, he was acknowledging that the American-led Cold War structure could not be the sole basis of a post-Cold War global structure.

As the only truly global power, US leadership is irreplaceable. But it clearly cannot now exercise leadership alone. This is not new. The US did not exercise leadership alone during the Cold War. But without the strategic imperatives of the Cold War, there is no compelling reason for other major powers - US allies included - to accept US leadership except on an ad-hoc and partial basis, which adds to the uncertainties of our time. There is also no compelling reason for the American people to continue to shoulder the burdens and sacrifices of leadership. But which country or group of countries has the capacity to, or is inclined to, provide sustained help to the US? Europe?

At the very heart of the post-Cold War European idea is a fundamental contradiction.

The European Union was conceived of as a post-nationalist construct. Ironically, it was inspired by nationalist fears of a superior nationalism. Germany is larger than any other European state. After Otto von Bismarck united Germany in the 19th century, the "German Question" led to two world wars. It resurfaced in 1989 after the respite of Cold War division. A reunited Germany was to be tamed by the "pooling of sovereignties", the centrepieces of which were the common currency and the Schengen Agreement.

But the ambition, once launched, soared beyond Germany. Europe as a community of values was intended to be a new kind of global power. There was to be a new and superior pan-European identity based on an ideal of universal rights and a generous social model. This was as much a delusion as the communist dream of creating a "new socialist man". Nationalism cannot be wished away. The instinct to define oneself by distinguishing like from the "other" is an intrinsic and primordial part of human nature. Any political project undertaken in defiance of human nature is bound to eventually fail. In this respect, the EU stands as a prime example of the futility and danger of letting mental frameworks, however appealing or noble, outrun reality.

European elites deeply believe in their utopian vision of Europe and the elite answer to any obstacle to the realisation of this vision has generally been "more Europe".

But the man-in-the-street, -rue, -strasse or -calle clearly does not agree with his enlightened betters and we are now witnessing the denouement of the internal contradictions of the post- Cold War European idea. The rise of extreme right-wing, neo-fascist anti-EU movements is one manifestation. The euro zone crisis is another.

Was it ever realistic to expect Greeks to behave with the fiscal discipline of Germans? Cultural differences, the social norms they generate and the differing conceptions of the "good life" do matter. But these are not the worst consequences of the divergence between ideal and reality.

I have never made a secret of my scepticism about the wilder boundaries of the European idea. In response, a European friend urged patience. It may take another generation or more, he said, but we will get there. Already, young Europeans have embraced the idea of Europe far more enthusiastically than their parents or grandparents, he argued.

Who are these young Europeans, I asked. Are they all middle-class, white, employed, at least nominally Christian or secular? He changed the subject. Too many non-white, Muslim Europeans face discrimination, ghettoisation and disproportionately high levels of unemployment, making them in effect a class of untermensch. Is it too fanciful to think that the divergence between the lofty European ideal and the grim reality they experience makes them susceptible to radicalisation? The Paris attacks, and those in London before that, were carried out by such second-generation "Europeans". The flood of Middle-Eastern refugees and illegal immigrants can only exacerbate the situation.

I take no joy in Europe's travails. In our own interests, we must hope that Europe sorts itself out as soon as possible. But this requires a scaling down of ambition to close the gap between ideal and reality. Among other things, this must entail acceptance of a more sustainable social model, some form of fiscal regime policed by Berlin and, above all, a painfully wrenching redefinition of European values and the meaning of being European. It will not be easy. Things will probably have to get worse and there will be many a futile gyration to evade reality before the inevitability of change is accepted.

The result will be a different and, hopefully, a more humble Europe. Certainly not one that can offer an alternative global vision.

America's East Asian allies - Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand - can at best help mainly in their own region and only sporadically elsewhere. And even in East Asia, as I will explain in a subsequent lecture, they are being subjected to powerful new forces that threaten to constrict what they can do.

Russia is a dissatisfied power, still smouldering with resentment at the loss of superpower status. Its main motivation is to prove that it still matters, particularly in its "near abroad". The story of American and European relations with Russia in the 1990s was one of squandered opportunity. In the immediate post-Cold War period, the US and Europe made a serious strategic mistake by treating post-Soviet Russia condescendingly as a defeated country and Moscow believes, not

without justification, that promises made at the end of the Cold War were not honoured because it was weak. In economic and demographic terms, Russia is on a long-term downward trajectory. Still, for now, it has the political will and sufficient muscle to demonstrate that its core interests, as in Ukraine and Syria, cannot be disregarded with impunity. Russia is not irrational and will cooperate with the West when its interests dictate it should. But it has no viable new global vision and is not in a position to exercise a global geopolitical role, except in a formal diplomatic sense as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Unlike Russia, India is not a dissatisfied power. Independent India has always had a global vision of itself. But that very vision has made it wary of playing any other major power's game. Acutely conscious of its ancient civilisation, it certainly will not play deputy to the US sheriff but seek an independent role. Does India's capability match its vision? Not yet. India is reforming. Its long-term prospects are good. Prime Minister Narendra Modi clearly wants to change India, but change does not come quickly to a subcontinental-sized country where each constituent state is practically a country unto itself. And notwithstanding its global vision, governing a vast, bewilderingly complicated democracy will always absorb most of any Indian government's energies. India more naturally looks inwards than outwards.

In practice, India's main external preoccupation is Pakistan, perhaps too much so, but understandably, given their history and Pakistan's longstanding ties with China.

India fought and lost a brief but traumatic war with China in 1962. Its illusions of Chinese-Indian brotherhood shattered, India then spent decades trying its best to ignore China, interacting only at the margins. It no longer has that luxury, but still does not quite know how to deal with China and so eyes it warily, while flirting with China's other Asian rival, Japan. But despite the apparent coincidence of strategic interests - promoted, or at any rate hyped, by their current prime ministers - I cannot think of two more mutually incomprehensible Asian cultures than India and Japan. This is not a partnership whose closer evolution as part of a new global structure is to be taken as a given.

Any new global order must have US-China relations as a central pillar. But we are still far from a G-2 world and it is not a foregone conclusion that it will ever be a G-2 world. I will deal with US-China relations in detail in a subsequent lecture. For now, it suffices to note only a few points.

First, US-China relations defy simple characterisation. China and the US are clearly not enemies. Neither can they be clearly said to be friends or natural partners. In this respect, US-China relations exemplify one of the most salient characteristics of post-Cold War major power relations: ambiguity. Profound interdependence of a new type coexists with equally profound strategic mistrust. The same is true of EU-Russia relations, Sino-Indian relations and Sino-Japanese relations.

Second, the main beneficiary of the end of the Cold War was not the "West" but China. Freed of the constraints imposed by its de facto membership of the US-led anti-Soviet alliance which it accepted out of necessity, but still largely a free rider globally and so without onerous international responsibilities, China has since the 1990s been free to single-mindedly pursue its own interests. It has plugged itself more successfully than any other major developing country into the

opportunities afforded by post-Cold War globalisation and thus rose with the results we all know.

Third, what will China do with its new status and power? That is not so clear, perhaps not even to China's own leaders. As the main beneficiary of the existing order, China has no strong incentive to kick over the table. Neither has it any deep attachment to a system that is heir to the order it holds responsible for "a hundred years of humiliation". Deng Xiaoping advised: "Hide your strength, bide your time."

Has that time now come? I would not rush to any conclusion one way or the other.

President Xi Jinping has been more ambitious than any of his predecessors since Mao Zedong in articulating an international vision for China. But it is primarily an East Asian and Eurasian and not a global vision and the vision lacks detailed resolution - still more a "China dream" than a China plan. Nor has China been consistent in either the articulation of its interests or its actions. Even in East Asia where Chinese and US interests most directly intersect, I do not believe either China or the US yet precisely knows what they want from each other, even as they seek a new accommodation with each other.

Where does that leave us?

The world now finds itself in an indeterminate situation. There is no satisfied country powerful enough to maintain the existing global order by itself, nor is there any satisfied country that can offer consistent help to maintain the existing global order. There is no country that is simultaneously dissatisfied enough and powerful enough to change the existing global order. The uncertain interregnum that we now find ourselves in is likely to last a long time, perhaps decades and not just a few years.

Why was the promise of a new post-Cold War world order not fulfilled? One key factor was the US attitude in the immediate post-Cold War period which proved self-defeating and made it more difficult than necessary for other major powers to swallow American leadership. The fundamental error was to misinterpret the meaning of the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to confound these related but distinct events. The Soviet Union undoubtedly failed. But did America or the "West" unambiguously win? What does "winning" in this context mean anyway? What is the "West" that allegedly won? In the rush of events, these questions, among others, were insufficiently probed.

Almost two years separate the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. And the US or the "West" generally was not necessarily the key actor.

There is, of course, no way of answering these questions definitively, just as there is no way of dismissing them entirely, and that is my point. History is replete with contingencies and the consequences of human agency are intrinsically unpredictable and often more limited than the actors may have thought.

Naked American triumphalism was given a superficial intellectual gloss by Professor Francis Fukuyama's infamous article in the neoconservative journal *The National Interest*, arguing that with America's victory, history had ended. History took no notice of Prof Fukuyama's theories and

went rolling bloodily along, manifesting itself, among other ways, through genocide in Rwanda and vicious wars of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. It was not until the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - at least in part inspired by universalist theories such as those he propounded - proved unwinnable, that Prof Fukuyama thought it prudent to write yet another book denying that he had ever been a neoconservative. My purpose is to illustrate the stubborn persistence of mental frameworks, irrespective of their appropriateness and in defiance of empirical evidence. And despite the accumulated weight of evidence, the universalist impulse still lingers in more invidious ways and continues to have real effects on policy.

I have already alluded to the way it was used to justify an ill-considered war to effect regime change in Iraq. The 2003 war shook confidence in American leadership, from which America has yet to fully recover. It precipitated a split in the transatlantic alliance and the EU. France and Germany led defiance of America; Mr Tony Blair's Britain enthusiastically embraced the war. Yet the same universalist impulse, lurking under the guise of humanitarian intervention, later led France and some other EU members of Nato into equally ill-considered bombing campaigns to try to change regimes, successfully in Libya, unsuccessfully in Syria, but with dismal results in both cases.

If American allies were disquieted, what impact would it have had on countries like China, Russia and India and in the Middle East and South-east Asia?

Inappropriate mental frameworks may not matter very much when the international order is settled. They matter a great deal in times of international uncertainty when basic assumptions are shaken and the global order lacks clear definition. It is in precisely those times when the human mind, discombobulated by too much uncertainty, most desperately, and thus uncritically, seeks out frameworks that will give the comfort of familiarity and comprehension in the midst of disorienting flux.

Oftentimes, the comfort is illusory. Contemporary examples are slogans like "A New Cold War" or "Asia Rising", as well as theories like the so-called "Thucydides Trap" or "A Clash of Civilisations", or analogies with pre-World War I Europe. I believe they are all at best over- simplifications; at worst, dangerous nonsense.

The basic strategic challenge facing all of us in times of international uncertainty is to position ourselves to preserve the widest range of options and avoid being forced into invidious choices. This is more difficult than the basic Cold War challenge of choosing wisely. When the international structure lacks clear definition, when major power relationships defy simple characterisation and the major powers are themselves groping towards new accommodations with one another, we have no firm landmarks from which to take bearings and we can only navigate with reference to our own assessments. And if our assessments are based on false frameworks, we might well mistake rocks and shoals for safe passage.