



SEMINAR REPORT

August 2024

ISC Special Talk

“Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN”

25 March 2024

SEMINAR REPORT

ISC Special Talk

“Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN”

by Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan



Organised by International Studies Center

25 March 2024

Narathip Auditorium, Ministry of Foreign Affairs



INTERNATIONAL STUDIES CENTER

ISC Special Talk

Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN

Publisher

Printed in August 2024 (200 copies) by International Studies Center,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangkok
E-mail: isc@mfa.go.th

Printing

P. Press, 129 Sukhumvit 81, On-nut, Suan Luang, Bangkok 10250
Tel. 02 742 4754

Publications of the International Studies Center are available for download at isc.mfa.go.th

National Library of Thailand Cataloging in Publication Data

ISC Special Talk “Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN”.

-- Bangkok: International Studies Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
2024. 34 p.

1. Geopolitics. 2. Geopolitics -- Asia. I. Title.

320.12

ISBN 978-616-341-155-6

Table of Contents

Special Talk

Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

4

Annex 1

The Risk of Conflict in Asia

20

Annex 2

Biography of the Speaker

26

Annex 3

Photos of the Event

27

Special Talk

“Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN”

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

Dr. Anuson Chinvanho

Good afternoon distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to see several ambassadors here today. The event this afternoon was suggested to me by Vice Minister Ambassador Sihasak Phuangketkeow, who originally intended to join the discussion but he had to go away on official business this morning. I don't know if he will be back in time for this event. I think our distinguished speaker today is known to all of you so I don't need to make a very long introduction, except to say that between 2001 and 2013, Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan was first the Second Permanent Secretary and then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore. He has served in a variety of appointments, including Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and Ambassador to the Russian Federation. He is currently the Chairman of the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore. Today, we are also distributing a paper written recently by Ambassador Bilahari, titled “The Risk of Conflict in Asia”. The paper will assist in our discussion this afternoon. So, without further ado, please allow me to invite Ambassador Bilahari to give a talk first.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

Thank you Ambassador Anuson. I must thank all my friends in the Thai Foreign Ministry for giving me this opportunity, especially my very old friend Ambassador Sihasak, who is now Vice Minister. He is not here but I will be seeing him later. I hope that this would be a dialogue, not a monologue. But let me make some preliminary comments. As Ambassador Anuson mentioned, I had given a paper I wrote recently on “The Risk of Conflict in Asia”, which deals with the North Korean issue, with the East and the South China Sea issue, the Taiwan issue. And I thought I would just get that out of the way so that we would not waste some time. If you need to ask me questions on that, of course you're most welcome. But what I want to do in these preliminary remarks is to make some general points about how to think about political events both globally and in this specific region. I think we generally paid too much attention to events, and not enough attention to the processes in which any event is necessarily embedded. And yet, we need context to see events in proper perspective and to react appropriately, neither overreacting, or being overly sanguine. This entails seeing them in the historical perspectives, in the historical context as part of larger processes, larger trends.

Right now, you can't open a newspaper in any language, I dare say, without reading about the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, about the U.S.-China strategic competition in one aspect or another. Generally speaking, these things are reported as if they are normal events. In a sense, they are, of course, because every war is a different war. Every war is a unique event.

But I think the hard fact is competition between major powers and hence the possibility of conflict, which often becomes the reality, are, to my mind, inherent characteristics of international relations. War, competition, these are constant realities that we should live with. And we have always lived with them. It was only a very short historically exceptional, indeed possibly abnormal, period of about 20 years from 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down. This harsh reality of competition and conflict has been inherent characteristics of international relations. For this short period it was masked by the overwhelming dominance of the United States. And yet, even when we're in this short period, there were two wars against Iraq. The U.S. also invaded Afghanistan. There were genocidal conflicts in the Balkans and in Rwanda. There were constant conflicts that continued to this day in the Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC and in Sudan. And there are numerous other conflicts, too many to mention, yet we don't focus on them, or we have forgotten that this is the constant reality.

I mentioned this to start because I want to remind particularly my friends and colleagues from this region, South East Asia, that we have survived and prospered under worse conditions than what we are experiencing now. In the 1960s to the 1980s, South East Asia, at least on the mainland, was in a constant state of war. All the five original ASEAN members faced armed insurgencies, communist insurgencies, supported by China, or at least subversive movements. It might surprise some of you, including maybe some of my younger Singaporean colleagues, do you know when was the last time a bomb went off in Singapore planted by the Malayan Communist Party? It was 1976. That's not a very long time ago. They did not recognize the independence of Singapore.

So, we have lived with this reality of conflict and great power competition. South East Asia is a strategic crossroads connecting the Pacific-Indian Oceans. And what that means is there has always, since time immemorial, been the site of competitions between major powers because it is a strategic crossroads. And yet, under this very dire condition, we have survived and not just survived, but we have prospered. We have grown and developed. And what we have done before, we can do again. The situations, the challenges, that we face today are real. Of course, I'm not downplaying them. The dangers are real. The uncertainties are real. But these are what the late Donald Rumsfeld, the former Secretary of Defence of the United States, called 'Known Unknowns'. How do you deal with this? You deal with these conflicts, you deal with competitions, you deal with the possibility of conflicts as they've always dealt with throughout history by deterrence, balance of power and diplomacy. And for younger colleagues from the Thai Foreign Ministry, defense and diplomacy are not alternatives. They are just different instruments on a spectrum of possibilities. And you need both because otherwise you cannot operate effectively. That's my first general point.

Second, I think there is another harsh reality that we often overlook or decide not to think about. The harsh reality is that not every international problem has a solution. In fact, I would say, many, if not most, problems have no solutions. Or the solutions are contingent and only engender a new set of problems. But they can be managed by the mixture of deterrence and diplomacy and sometimes one may be managed better than other types. But there are no solutions, and that's certainly true of the war in Ukraine, or the war in Gaza, or many other problems that we face today.

Let me say a few words about Ukraine and Gaza to illustrate this point. The battlefield situation in Ukraine is a stalemate, as could be predicted from the very beginning. It's not possible for Russia to win, nor is it possible for Ukraine to push Russia out of all the Occupied Territories. Now please don't misunderstand me, this war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine is certainly an egregious violation of fundamental norms but again it's not unique. What is unique about Ukraine? Apart from the fact that it's occurring in Europe instead of a third-world country, what's unique is only that, for the first time in a long time, white people are killing white people, to put it very bluntly. It's not just a battlefield stalemate that we face, it's also a political stalemate. Those countries, including mine, that for good reasons stand strong against the aggression against Ukraine are now in a bit of a bind, because many Western countries cast the war in very high moral terms. Any solution, if there is to be a solution, which I doubt, must entail some loss of Ukrainian territories. How do you justify that politically having got on a very moral high horse? You can't. So, the best you can expect from Ukraine is an armistice not a settlement and a divided country on the line of what you see today after 70 odd years in the Korean peninsula.

Gaza, I think all countries represented in this room support a two-state solution, the only permanent solution to the problem of Palestine. That's like saying water is wet. But I've yet to hear any viable pathway to a two-state solution. The Middle East is the land where there is no good options. There are only bad options and worse options. To Israel, the immediate task is to restore the deterrence that they've lost on October 7. And they must do that. That's the existential issue to Israel. But what they must do and are doing to restore the deterrence makes the pathway to any kind of solution even more difficult to envisage for the foreseeable future. And that's the cruel dilemma that is faced there. And the fact of the matter is, I don't see any of the major parties involved: the Israeli, Fatah, the Palestinian authority, or Hamas, or whatever replaces it, have any real interest in any kind of solution because some level of conflict gives them power. That doesn't mean that the issue cannot be managed better than it has been managed so far. It can be of course. But that's different from saying that there's a definitive solution. And don't forget, there are considerable numbers and growing numbers, I think, of both sides, of the two parties directly involved, the Palestinians and the Israelis, who do not want a two-state solution. They want a one-state solution, And that's a zero-sum game. But again it can be managed.

And I think Taiwan, South China Sea, East China Sea, and the conflict in the Himalayas, are similar conflicts. There are no solutions. But they can be managed. And in fact, by and large, they are being managed.

Let me come to say a few words on the U.S. and China strategic rivalry. As I said earlier, competition, rivalry between major powers is nothing unique. It is in fact the normal state of affairs among major powers. There is a difference of course which we see today. From 1972, when the U.S. and China restored contacts, to 2010 or thereabouts, there were of course periods of tensions over such issues as Tibet or Taiwan or numerous issues in general. But by and large, the overall emphasis on the relation was on engagement. Now it's switched. There will still be periods of engagement. We've recently seen various high-level exchanges between the U.S. and China. But overall now, the emphasis is going to be on competition. That is the strategic reality. There may be periods of high intensity competition, lower intensity

competition, but generally competition. It's a new structural feature of international relations. That does not mean that we should see every issue in terms of the U.S. and China competition. It's a far too simplicity in a way of looking at things. And we can discuss that further in question time.

But because it is a structural issue, it's going to be with us for decades to come. I think it's important to understand the U.S.-China relations accurately. I think one of the most intellectually lazy tropes which is used to describe U.S.-China relations is to call it the new 'Cold War'. There are some superficial similarities in U.S.- China competition to the earlier competition between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. But the similarities, to my mind, are superficial. There are much more fundamental differences that define this competition. And it is important for all of us to deal with it, to navigate through it, to understand what makes it different.

The U.S. and the former Soviet Union led, in principle at least, two entirely different systems. They were connected only at the margins. And the competition was one of the existential competitions between systems to see which would replace the other. By contrast, however, the U.S. and China are both vital and irreplaceable components of a single global system. They are connected to each other and to the rest of us by historically new phenomenon. And that historically new phenomenon is supply chains of complexity and of density and of a scope never before seen in human history. And that's what distinguishes 21st century interdependence from earlier periods of interdependence. We have not seen this kind of complex supply chain. In fact, the very term 'chain', the metaphor 'chain', oversimplifies the situation. A better metaphor to my mind is of the root system of a tree, leading to a trunk, leading to branches, leading to twigs, leading to capillaries of leaves. And a whole forest of those trees that grew up during the short and exceptional period I referred to earlier. And that constitutes the global economy today. And I think it is a practical impossibility for this system to completely bifurcate into two separate systems such as existed between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. There is, and will be, partial bifurcation, particularly in areas of high technology. We have already seen it and we will see more of it. Now mind you, the U.S. and China are not comfortable with the current situation because it exposes their mutual vulnerabilities. Both of them have tried to mitigate the risks, the U.S. by the strategy of diversification of supply chains out of China, and China, by trying to become more self-reliant in critical technologies. But I think, both strategies, whether diversification or self-reliance, are all easier said than done. And I think both will fail or will succeed only partially and you can see it.

I give you one simple example. I think you all know that semiconductors have emerged as the major Chinese vulnerability, particularly, at the high-end of semiconductors because the semiconductor supply chain is one of the most complex of all supply chains. Most vital knowledge are held by the U.S., by its allies, by its partners, by its friends. And this is causing China immense problems. There are ways to work around it but it's more costly and don't forget you are dealing with the moving frontier. The Chinese are probably 5-10 years behind. And they will probably be 5-10 years behind because the frontier is moving. But, at the same time, China accounts for about 40% of the world semiconductor market. And you cannot possibly cut off your own companies or those of your allies, those of your partners or your

friends for 40% of any market, even the market for shoes, there will be serious damage. So it's not a binary competition as existed between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union. It's a much more nuanced competition. The U.S. and the Soviet Union competed between two systems. This is a competition within a system. And that is a complex, not a binary competition.

With that said, I think we should welcome this complexity because in complexity, there is much more opportunity to exercise agency for other countries. Now whether you have the wit to recognize those opportunities to exercise agency, or whether you have the ability, the agility to seize those opportunities, that's a different matter. But in complexity, in principle, there is always agency.

Now that said, the U.S. and China are nonetheless obviously the two primary external geopolitical realities we all have to deal with. I think it is fortunate that, as I mentioned a moment ago, high level contacts, engagements between the U.S. and China have resumed, each for their own reasons, neither is looking for trouble actively. But neither is willing to forswear the competition either, to concede the competition to the other. But it is manageable.

Let me say a few words about China and the U.S. vis-a-vis South East Asia. China, by virtue of its proximity to South East Asia, by virtue of its size, by virtue of its economic and strategic way, would always exercise significant influence in South East Asia. But for those precisely the same reasons, its size, its contiguity, and its way, China is always going to arouse anxieties in South East Asia. Both the influence and the anxiety are two realities of China which are connected and we should not forget. There is also something that has happened in perceptions of China that are not always articulated but nonetheless real. In the last 15 years or so, I think while China's rise is real and is one of the remarkable stories of the 20th century, I think it has become more and more evident that there are some serious structural problems in China. Demographics is the simplest but the most straightforward and the most obvious one. But there are much more political structural problems. It means that China will perform suboptimally for the foreseeable future. We can go into the details in question time if you like because I don't want to take up too much time on that. So, I think people have arrived at a more balanced view of the Chinese in the last 10-15 years. Because the governance of China, particularly, in the last 10 years, under Mr. Xi Jinping, has been mediocre. I can't, think of any single initiative China has started in the last 10 years that you can fairly describe as an unqualified success. Even the signature Belt and Road, which I've always been rather skeptical about, is more of a collection of projects wrapped up in a slogan and presented as a strategy. It has been running into certain difficulties which we all know. Some projects work better than others. Some have failed. And some will have to be scaled down. But it's still an issue, China I mean. You can't ignore geopolitical reality. And there is a better appreciation, I think, that in order to deal with China, you have to deal with the U.S., particularly in South East Asia. Singapore has always held the position that the U.S. is an irreplaceable factor in any strategic balance in this part of the world, in any part of the world actually. For a very long time, this was considered a very eccentric Singaporean view.

In the late 1980s, a combination of natural disaster, a volcanic explosion, the Filipino domestic politics called the U.S. to leave the Subic Bay and Clark Airfield in the Philippines. We, then, made an offer because we thought it was important. By the way, Singapore is not a substitute for either Subic Bay or Clark Airfield because if you've ever been to Subic Bay, you

can drop Singapore into it and you will never find us again. But we thought it was important that there should be some physical American military presence in South East Asia. So we offered the U.S. our facilities. And in 1990, we signed an MOU to that effect. Then what happened? Our closest neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia, reacted hysterically and tried to pressure us into giving up that MOU, the agreement to let the U.S. use some of our facilities. That was 1990. Fast forward to 2019, when that 1990 MOU was renewed, the renewed MOU was signed by my Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, and then-president Trump. It wasn't a secret ceremony. It was signed at the UNGA with full publicity. What happened? Nothing happened. Not a whimper of a protest from anybody. That is a very significant change of attitude. There is a better appreciation on how to deal with either China or the U.S. Effectively, you have to deal with both simultaneously. Now I wish I could claim this as a success for Singaporean foreign policy, but honesty compels me to say it is much more due to the failures of Chinese foreign policy and changes in the strategic environment than anything we or the U.S. or anybody else did. And most ASEAN countries, not all, are doing what they can to improve their defense relations with the U.S., including those with strong traditions of being non-aligned like Indonesia.

But for a variety of reasons, some of the other ASEAN countries, and not just Indonesia, even countries like Vietnam that fought a very bitter war with the U.S., are improving their defense and security ties. But there are a variety of reasons why many of these countries, domestic politics mainly, have to be a bit more cautious and don't talk about it very much. I don't want to exaggerate the point but what we are able to do with the U.S. is something of a regional public good at least by some countries. But there is a better appreciation of the vital role of the U.S. in maintaining regional balance and not just in South East Asia by the way. The war in Gaza shows that so far if anybody can hold the balance in the Middle East, it is the U.S. and nobody else. And in Europe, with the war in Ukraine, the Europeans are incapable of dealing with Russia without the U.S. at their back.

But just as this realization has sunk in throughout our region, concerns about the U.S. have also risen. And those concerns mainly are a sense of direction that domestic politics may bring to the U.S. foreign policy. Now, it's not all about Trump, mind you. Although the coming election provides a certain focus, in fact, the changes in the U.S. foreign policy in our region took place about half a century ago, when, as part of correcting the dreadful mistake they made in Vietnam, the U.S. moved from a strategic posture of direct intervention to one of being offshore balancer. They have been remarkably consistent as offshore balancer for 50 years. That's exactly the role they are playing out in the Middle East for example. You may recall that when the war in Gaza began, the latest war in Gaza I mean, Iran was talking rather fiercely. Then the U.S. deployed two aircraft carriers and a Tomahawk-armed nuclear submarine to the region. And Iran sent word at least twice that has been reported openly that they did not want a regional conflict. Even Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq, having killed three American service persons and suffered bombing by America, sent word that they won't do it again. The Houthis are still shooting but even that level of attacks have calmed down. Hezbollah and Israel still exchange fire on the northern front, and as I understand this, that's very ritualistic. So the only balancer is the U.S.

But there are concerns about U.S. behavior. This shift from direct intervention to offshore balancing is also occurring in the Middle East, as the U.S. rectifies the mistakes they made in Afghanistan and Iraq and shifted to offshore balancing. It will happen in Europe sooner or later. It may be delayed by the war in Ukraine but I don't think the trajectory will shift. Now, Mr. Trump sometimes says very intelligent things, maybe by accident, but nonetheless intelligent. If you recall, during the campaign, he asked a very important question "Why are American troops in Germany?" It's not a bad question, you know. Why are they there? So I think sooner or later, the U.S. is going to shift the offshore balancing role in Europe as well as in the Middle East and East Asia. That will cost immense problem in Europe. We, in South East Asia, have made those adjustments long ago. I think this is a structural change. This is sometimes misrepresented as the U.S. is in retreat. I think that's the wrong way. I think it is better understood as the U.S. unilaterally readjusting its global strategic posture from direct intervention to being an offshore balancer. What is driving it is the fact that the U.S. took some time to recognize that after the end of the U.S-Soviet Cold War, the U.S. faces no existential threat any way. China is a formidable competitor but it's not an existential threat. Remember I said that they're competing within the system. That's different from competition between two different systems, one to replace the other. They may want to dominate the system or retain their dominance but they're not trying to destroy the system or replace it. So, it's not an existential threat. Russia is very dangerous but does it propose any existential threat? Maybe to some European countries but not the U.S. and I could go on. So, the point here is George W. Bush is a partial exception because of 9/11. The foremost priorities of every post-Cold War American president have been domestic. There's not very much difference between 'Making America Great Again' or 'Putting America First', Trump's slogan, and Biden's 'Build America Back Better'. Or even Obama when he talked about change. He was not talking about change abroad. He was talking about change at home. Mr. Trump did not invent transactionalism. And offshore balancer is still engaged in the world but it is still going to be much more discriminating about how it gets involved in conflicts. And the simple reason is, if there's no existential threat, why should Americans be willing to bear any burden or pay any price to uphold international order? In any case, I think it's a fundamental mistake, which was instilled in us during that short exceptional period of 20 years, to think of international order as necessarily uncontested or even peaceful. After all, for 40 odd years after the end of the Second World War, international order or what there was an order will be defined by the contest, not by a single consensus. And I think we are back to that period. That is normal. What we experienced was abnormal. I think we should not lose sight of that.

Now how do we deal with this? I think it is possible to deal with this. Let me step back. If you put all what I said together, I think all of us are confronted with two fundamental strategic realities. One, we all know we have to deal with both the U.S. and China. As I said, we know that dealing with both simultaneously is a more necessary condition than dealing with either effectively. But, at the same time, we all have concerns over one or the other or both U.S. and Chinese behaviors. Now, you put these two things together and I think what you're going to have is an evolving international order, defined not by contest but by greater fluidity. As countries seek much broader strategic options, you will see coalitions of countries working together built around different issues. And these coalitions will not be stable. There'll be a

certain combination of countries which may include the U.S. and China or one or the other on some issues. We may exclude both on different issues. And it will form and reform constantly. You've already seen the beginning of that system, if you like, evolving, where Japan took initiative after the Trump Administration abandoned the TPP to reform it as the CPTPP. So, how do you deal with this much more fluid and dynamic order? I think you deal with it by repeating a point by defense and diplomacy. It will require greater strategic alertness. It will require the ability to clinically assess international events, which is easier said than done, and not to mistake hope or fear for reality.

Let me end with a few words about ASEAN. ASEAN often says we don't want to have to choose between the U.S. and China and that's obviously true. What do we mean by that? We do not mean neutrality. If you look at the history of South East Asia, countries that tried neutrality, Laos and Cambodia, came up to very tragic ends. What we mean when we say we don't want to choose is we want to be able to choose our interests in different domains in both advantageous directions for ourselves. And we don't see any need to neatly line up all our interests across all domains in one direction or the other. If I take my own country on defense and security issues, we've already chosen a long road. It's in the direction of the U.S. particularly, and the West generally. But, on certain political issues, we, with our general political attitudes, are much more aligned with those of China. And on economic issues, we are more eclectic. We work with anybody who works with us. And I think that is the general attitude of most countries in our region. I can only think of three countries that really have more or less chosen one side or the other. That's Laos and Cambodia on the one hand and Australia on the other. Even an ally of the U.S. like Japan wants to retain as much strategic flexibility as they can. Of course, they have less room to maneuver than countries like Singapore or Indonesia because Japan is a formal treaty ally and we are not. But in principle, it has the same attitude.

Now, ASEAN, to my mind, has been rather slow to adapt to this much more fluid and dynamic strategic environment. We talked a lot about centrality. We choose to believe it when our dialogue partners congratulate us on our centrality. But, what does centrality really mean? Centrality really means making yourself useful. How you make yourself useful in the past is not necessarily how you're going to make yourself useful in the future. In fact, it cannot be. Don't forget that the emblems of ASEAN centrality, for example, the ARF, and the EAS, were actually conceived of and implemented during that short period of world history. So, they still perform a function but it's not quite the same function or the same relevance, the same usefulness as in the past. It's a hard fact that we have yet to fully internalize.

I promise this is my last point. Why have we been slow to adapt? It's not that this present generation of ASEAN leaders and foreign ministers are less competent or less capable than the previous ones. The hard fact is that the domestic political environment in almost every ASEAN country have become more complex. So, it's harder for countries to get internal consensus on key things. And if you can't get internal consensus, it's gonna be harder to get regional consensus. That does not mean that ASEAN is irrelevant. We should not forget that dealing with external affairs has always been a secondary function of ASEAN. Older people, like my friend Tej, know that ASEAN was born out of the need to have some mechanism to manage relations amongst South East Asian countries. That is still a very relevant function.

And there is no other mechanism that we have to perform that function. But we should not confuse that with being able to manage external affairs. That will require conceptualization of ASEAN's role in the region and how ASEAN operates. Well, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for listening to me so patiently.

Dr. Anuson Chinvanno

Thank you so much Ambassador Bilahari for a very comprehensive picture of what we face now geopolitically both around the world and in this region. Of course, I'm sure there are a lot of questions people would like to ask because, being your normal self, you've made everything stimulating. And I think there are a lot of points that we could follow up on.

And I'm going to use the moderator prerogative to ask the first one. I think you're right in saying that ASEAN doesn't want to choose side. But how do we do it in practical terms to show that we're not choosing?

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

That's a very good question. But before I answer, I should make one more point that I forgot to make at the beginning. Do not forget that the only official position I hold now is that of a pensioner. To answer your question, I think you choose it by having a very clear sense. As I mentioned briefly, the main mechanism for dealing with external work has always been national, not regional. Regional is a supplement. The regional mechanisms are not working too well these days. So, we have to look nationally. Each of us will have to define our own national interests in different domains and have the capability and the political courage to pursue them. That capability is often a function of our domestic politics. For Singapore, dealing with the U.S.-China relations is almost totally conditioned by domestic politics. How well we can handle our domestic politics. Dealing with Gaza is, to us, primarily a domestic political issue. Our primary consideration - how to maintain social coalitions in a multicultural, multi-religion society. Every country, every 10 members of ASEAN will have different equations, depending on their particular domestic politics on their particular interests in how they define their interests. So, there is not one answer that fits all. For us, as I told you on defense and security issues, we have decided quite long ago, and I don't see that changing, that our interests in that domain are aligned in this direction. We put some political domains in a different direction, economic domains in many directions simultaneously. Thailand will probably have a different configuration because you are a different country. You have different domestic politics and different interests. Ditto for Indonesia, for the Philippines, for Vietnam, and for every ASEAN country. And that's true I think throughout this region.

India has a long and proud non-aligned tradition. But on certain issues, they decided to take the interests in the direction of The Quad. But that does not mean it has to align all of the interests in that direction. Why should it? So why should any ASEAN country neatly line up all the ducks in one row, in one direction or the other?

South East Asia, having lived in the midst of the great power conflict for centuries, has this kind of instinct built into the diplomatic DNA. All of us, with the exceptions I mentioned, our foreign policies are naturally polygamous, not monogamous. And that counts also for formal treaty allies, like the Philippines and Thailand. It's natural if you live in the arena of

great power conflict. This comes naturally. If it doesn't come naturally, if you cannot implement it, you don't survive. And we have not only survived, we have prospered.

Dr. Anuson Chinvanno

Thank you. I think that's a very interesting way of putting it because I think for many people looking in from outside, they tend to look at ASEAN as having cohesive foreign relations which of course we don't. That's why they made criticism, or they made points, that ASEAN cannot deal with questions like the South China Sea as a group or that we don't have a common position when we negotiate. How do you explain that?

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

I don't agree with that view. For example, I don't see why Laos, which is a landlocked country, should have the same position on the South China Sea as a country like Singapore. It's not possible. But on South China Sea, we have a minimal consensus. ASEAN, as you know, has never felt that it has to have a common position on every issue. If we try, we will fall apart. Or we will end up like the EU having the same positions on issues. So, we don't even try mostly. For example, on things like Gaza, we have a general position. It's very general because, certainly, muslim-majority countries like Indonesia or Malaysia or Brunei will have a different definition of the interests there than countries like Thailand or Singapore or Vietnam and so on. So, if we can, we have a broad consensus on the South China Sea, on Gaza, and on a few other issues. But we don't try to force it. We are diverse. What is the most primary characteristic of South East Asia? This is a diverse place. I think it's one of the most diverse regions in the world. And the diversities are not those that you can envisage leveling out. Because there are primordial diversities of race, of language, of religion. This is not going to change in any significant way. Therefore, you need ASEAN to manage these diversities. Therefore, there are also going to be limitations to what ASEAN can do. And certain things are best done nationally rather than regionally. So, we never pretend to have regional solutions to every problem.

Dr. Anuson Chinvanno

I agree. I think if you come from ASEAN members, you understand that perfectly well. I think sometimes, it's our dialogue partners who tend to look at ASEAN as a sort of cohesive entity. Maybe that's how we would like them to look at us.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

They sometimes take our rhetoric a bit too seriously. Also, there is that strong tendency among some dialogue partners, but not all. I think Japan understands us pretty well. Australia understands us pretty well. China understands us pretty well. But amongst, say, more Western dialogue partners, when they look at ASEAN, they see the EU, either actual or potential. But we have never had that aspiration to be a supranational entity because it just doesn't work. It doesn't even work very well in Europe. So how can it work in South East Asia?

Dr. Anuson Chinvanno

I think maybe now I will open up the floor for those who wish to make any questions or just some observations on what Ambassador Bilahari has said. I think there are a lot of issues that we can discuss. Some of the issues he didn't discuss fully because they're already in the paper that has been circulated, like issues of the South China Sea, Taiwan, North Korea. Anybody wishes to ask questions?

Dr. Nattha Komolvadhin

My name is Nattha Komolvadhin. I'm working with an online media company, The Standard. You mentioned a lot about the diversities of ASEAN countries but also emphasized the centrality of ASEAN.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

I didn't emphasize. I tried to define what centrality means.

Dr. Nattha Komolvadhin

Yes, you mentioned that. So, can you elaborate more? How can ASEAN survive as a community under external threats by U.S.-China competition? And what should ASEAN leaders do more in order to strengthen the ASEAN community?

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

ASEAN has survived pretty well. They haven't just survived but they prospered under much worse conditions than we face today. Consider the conditions of South East Asia in 1967 when ASEAN was formed. Singapore had just been asked to leave Malaysia. The relationship was extremely fraught with danger. In 1967, Indonesia had just stopped fighting an undeclared war against Malaysia, and when we were separated also against Singapore, called Confrontasi or Confrontation. The Philippines was actively pursuing a claim against a very large chunk of Malaysia in Sabah. And there were strong irredentist movements along the border between Southern Thailand and Northern West Malaysia, and Southern Philippines and Eastern part of Indonesia. And as I said, all of us face internal communist insurgencies. At that time, it was quite common to refer to South East Asia as the Balkans of Asia. Look at us now. We have problems of course. Which region has no problems? But I think the fact that we've been able to manage the problem is due, in no small part, to the existence of ASEAN. If it doesn't exist, we will have to invent something quite similar.

Now, centrality, as I said, the meaning in its essence is very simple, "make yourself useful". Make yourself useful so that external powers have some stakes in your survival. You don't become central by just sitting down twiddling your thumbs and repeating over and over again "I am central, I am central" as if it's some kind of magic incantation that if you repeat it enough, a genie will appear and grant you your wishes. You make yourself central by making yourself useful. How you make yourself useful of course should be in your interest, both nationally and regionally.

I give you one example. I think there's a good reason for ASEAN not wanting to get involved in some aspects of The Quad obviously. But why should we not get involved with

The Quad on supply chain resilience which is in the interest of all 10 members of the ASEAN as well as the region? Because in so far as there's some diversification in order to build supply chain resilience, we would like South East Asia to be beneficial. Why should we not work on health aspects, the health agenda of The Quad? Now what ASEAN leaders, at any level, from Heads of State and Government down to Ministers and senior officials, need to do better is to have very frank strategic discussions of the challenges facing us. I don't think it has been frank enough. They need to discuss what we can do and what we cannot do. There are some things you'll not be able to do because ASEAN is diverse and therefore we have different definitions of national interests. But there are certainly some things that we could do. But the starting point is to have at least a broad common understanding of the strategic environment, the challenges we face, and I don't think we have it yet.

On the South China Sea, there's probably not very much we can do together because we have differences of interests. But we have some common interests, which is what is captured in 2012, and I forgot what we called it, the "six-point step" or something like that which came up after the Cambodian chairmanship, thanks to then Foreign Minister Marty of Indonesia. So you have to be very clear about what's within a region, as a region, and what needs to be dealt with nationally. We have to be clear what is in our national interest, and we have to be very clear that some part of our national interest has to take into account the regional interest. It doesn't have to be a very large part but it should never be totally absent. So, I think we're doing alright. We could do much better actually. I don't think we're doing as well as we could in managing the external account. That's because the domestic politics of almost all the ASEAN countries has become extremely complex than in the past, including in a one-party state like Vietnam, as we can see recently. That's the reality. You can't go back to the old days. So, you have to learn to manage it the best you can. I think we could do better but that's my opinion of a pensioner. But I think behind your question, it's really again lurky, the shadow of the EU as the model of regional cooperation. It is not because you use the word community. Bear in mind that when ASEAN uses the word community, actually we use it with the lowercase C. There's no uppercase C which carries the connotation of supranationality. No such ambition in ASEAN.

Ambassador Ilse Lilian Ferrer Silva

Thank you, Ambassador, what a pleasure to be here. I have two questions. I noticed you commented about the changes that are taking place internationally from direct intervention to offshore balancing. And I noticed in the audience that there's a very large group of young students. So, the first question or request would be what is your advice to the youth in particular to those that might be interested in getting into diplomacy? What will be required of future diplomats?

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

I'm tempted to say 'Don't'.

Ambassador Ilse Lilian Ferrer Silva

So that would be my first question. The second question has to do with your last comment. I very much liked your comment on the fact that this region has a diplomatic DNA.

And you emphasized that that occurs in all of South East Asia, particularly because of the need to deal with many relations and you need it to survive and to thrive. And it comes to mind that I, being the Mexican Ambassador and my last post being in California, there is such a great diversity, growing diversity, in states like the one that I served in. What advice would South East Asia give the United States into better deal with regional cooperation and its relationship with its neighbors like Mexico? Thank you.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

I'll deal with the first question first. If you want a career in diplomacy, please do not think it's all glamor and cocktail parties and things like that. Most of it is hard and boring work. You can prepare yourself for it, not by studying international relations. I think that's probably the worst possible preparation because I did. Then I practiced what I studied and I came to a rather set conclusion that if there was any relationship between what I studied and what I did for a living for 30 odd years, it was purely coincidental. Study history. Study literature. Study philosophy. I think it's much better preparation and to be of course interested in fellow human beings because diplomacy is a labor intensive profession.

Your second question, of course, is a loaded one. And being Mexican, the old saying of Mexico, "Per Mexico, so close to the United States, so far from God". So, if I was a Mexican, I would just pray hard. It's a difficult problem. Relations between neighbors are always more complicated than relations with countries far away, because neighbors interact in so many different dimensions, in so many different pain points and pleasure points. It's very difficult. And the domestic politics of the United States is much more complicated than absolutely necessary, shall we say. But I think Mexico has dealt with the United States very well for as long as there has been Mexico. So, you don't need me to give you advice. You know well what to do and you do it pretty well. I am reminded of when Mr. Trump was first elected as President. Among the first two phone calls he took was from the then-Prime Minister of Australia and the then-President of Mexico. The transcripts of both calls were leaked to the Washington Post. I read them and I said this is a master class on how to deal with America and how not to deal with America. The Australian Prime Minister was lobbying for something to do with immigration. And Trump reluctantly gave it to him almost immediately, reluctant but immediate. But he kept pressing Mr. Trump because he wanted him to agree with him as well. Your President wisely talked to Mr. Trump, agreed with him, and then stopped the phone conversation because he wanted to build the basis on which you have to live with next door. And you did live with it quite well. I know these walls and all that are ridiculous but they are part of American domestic politics. It can't be gotten rid of. If all so-called illegal and undocumented immigrants from Mexico or from other Latin-American countries were to be removed from the United States, the economy of states like California will collapse immediately. You know that. Americans also know that. I dare say even the legislators in America who support walls and stupid things like that know that too. But it's all domestic politics. You don't need me to advise you how to do it. You do it very well. I read those two transcripts and I said this is a master class on how to deal with Americans. And you dealt with it perfectly whereas the Australian guy got what he wanted immediately and still kept pressing for agreement on the reasons. Mr. Trump didn't understand the reasons. He didn't understand

the issue. He just knew he had to give this guy something so just take it, put it in your pocket. Thank you very much. And stopped the phone call which is what your President very wisely did.

Participant

I want to go back to the earlier question. With all due respect, I think it's a little bit too simple to say ASEAN has done a lot in the past, so don't ask further questions. In 2015, ASEAN signed up to a community project from 2015-2025. Now there's one year left. How much has ASEAN managed to implement if you look at the case of Myanmar? It overreaches itself. In the case of Myanmar, we don't see much. The Five-Point project (consensus) from ASEAN hasn't been taken up by the Myanmar leadership. So, this is not something to say that it's the missing of internal cohesion that undermines ASEAN's strength as a central actor. The missing of internal strength weakens its role as a regional organization. What's your opinion on that?

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

My opinion is that you don't understand ASEAN at all.

Participant

I do understand ASEAN. I do not accept it.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

Your opinion on whether you accept us or not is irrelevant. Opinion of ourselves is irrelevant opinion. Look, it is pointless to criticize a cow for being an imperfect horse, which is what basically you are doing. A cow is a very useful animal but it's not a horse. It will never be a horse. You mentioned Myanmar. What do you expect us to do? Put together an ASEAN military force, invade Myanmar, depose the military, and reinstall Aung San Suu Kyi? That is a fantasy that even the wildest ASEAN leader has never entertained for good reason. Community means we work together where we can and we don't work together when it's impossible. That is the fact of life. If ASEAN overreaches itself, yes I agree it's not an ideal situation, that is obvious. But if you try to achieve perfection in the real world, you will weaken yourself much more than you will strengthen yourself. That is a fact of life.

Mr. Prida Tiasuwan

Excellency, my name is Prida. I'm from the industry sector and I am from ASEAN. Following that gentleman's question, on the same kind of thing, we have a commitment with the United Nations on zero carbon in 2050. Your suggestion until now in dealing with the Americans or dealing with the Chinese is for us ASEAN to be more nimble and make ourselves useful. But the United Nations demand that by 2030 we have to commit ourselves to a certain amount of carbon dioxide elimination. By 2050, we have to be zero carbon. This is obviously the long-term working plan. But as of now, I hear that what you are trying to make sense out of our discussion is saying "ASEAN, you should be nimble. You should actually make yourself useful and you should be a little more flexible" and all that. I'm just worried that with that kind of working way, we may not be able to achieve our commitment to the United Nations in 2050.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

We will not and no country will. That's the fact of life. But it's important to make the commitment so that you have a goal, an aspiration. But I don't think there's a single country that will make it. We talk about energy transition. It's going to be a very long energy transition. 2050 is not a very long time away, by the way. Some people in this room, not me, will be alive to see it. But I don't think there's any country that is going to meet that target. Nonetheless, we must have a target. So, there's at least a common direction that we're moving towards.

Mr. Prida Tiasuwan

Well, in that case, I would like to ask your government to talk to your nation that let's forget 2050.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

Well, all governments gotta talk. One government talking is no use. But the commitment is important but in reality, nobody is going to make it. That's my opinion.

Dr. Anuson Chinvano

I think it's been explained. It's a target. Of course, we all have to aim to be able to achieve the target. Maybe it's your opinion that we won't reach the target. Maybe it's your opinion that we could reach the target. But I think we have all made commitments and I think we will all try to achieve the target. But of course, it's not just the governments, it's the people. If we don't follow the low carbon footprint, then just the governments are not going to be able to achieve anything. It's up to everybody to pitch in their efforts.

Ambassador Sihasak has arrived back from Mae Sot. Would you like to say something?

Ambassador Sihasak Phuangketkeow

First of all, I want to thank my good friend, Bilahari, for coming here and always sharing his thinking. In the ASEAN meetings, I always sat next to him. And he's someone who does not mince words. He can be very frank. He can be very blunt and sometimes he can also be very harsh. But he's reflected on all these issues before, so I always benefited from his thinking.

I just came back from Mae Sot. And we delivered the first lot of humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. Of course, people say that we're giving assistance to the SAC. Well, the SAC is the Red Cross. Sometimes we must make do with what we have. But it's not the Red Cross doing it itself. But we make sure that the Red Cross also works with the local community. And I think what's more important is that the assistance reaches everyone in that area without discrimination. Of course, we have to monitor. We have to make sure. At least that's the starting point. And I think, Bilahari and I, we agree that we have to engage. There must be a starting point for engagement. The Five-Point consensus is a good framework but how do we implement it? So, this is our effort to implement the Five-Point consensus. At least, when it comes to humanitarian assistance, we've been working closely with ASEAN and all our partners. So we hope that this small initiative can be built upon and maybe lead to bigger things and better things ahead. Anyway, I really want to thank my good friend Bilahari for coming here. And

look at the number of people here. The room is full. I'm not sure whether there are any more questions.

But I have a question. Khun Nattha asked about ASEAN's centrality. I want to ask maybe a bigger question. What is the future of ASEAN? In the midst of all these, not just geopolitics, but also geoeconomic competition, geotechnology, and all these competitions, what is the future of ASEAN? Because we seem to be not doing what you've always advised that we have to hang together or we will be hung separately. So that's my question.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

I thank Sihasak for inviting me. Now, I think ASEAN is always going to perform a very basic function of managing relations among its members. And I think it's been pretty successful in doing that. It's built a habit of consultation. Consultation doesn't mean we need to agree all the time. We will not be able to agree all the time. That's certainly a fact of life but we need to talk to each other and we need to talk to each other particularly when we don't agree. If we already agree, it's simple. I think ASEAN is not quite yet but approaching an inflection point. We want to be central and, to me, centrality has a very simple meaning. It means making yourself useful so that other people have a stake in your survival and your prosperity. But how we do that cannot remain static because the world changes around you, and you have to adapt to those changes. I think we have been slow to adapt. I don't think it's at a critical stage yet. But there will be an inflection point. If there is a conflict in the region, the inflection point will come sooner. I don't think it is going to be a conflict by design, meaning war as an instrument of policy. I don't think that is very probable. In fact, it's very unlikely. The real risk is accidents getting out of hand, and I think that risk has probably risen somewhat over issues like Taiwan. Not very high, but it has risen somewhat. So, I think an urgent need for ASEAN, at various levels, is to have a real strategic dialogue, which we haven't had for a long time. We had discussions we called strategic. But I think it's not really strategic. I think it's time for us to sit down and revisit fundamentals. Some fundamentals we will readily agree on are still valid. That means we need some mechanisms for managing the diversity and the differences that make up South East Asia. But we also need to go beyond the tried-and-tested. For example, progress on things like a common production platform in South East Asia is going to be very slow. For all the reasons you know, many domestic political conditions in key ASEAN countries are going to move forward slowly. But we shouldn't give up. But what else can we do to make ourselves useful and make ourselves relevant. I don't know whether you were here when I gave one example which has been on my mind. I'll repeat it. I said there are quite good reasons why ASEAN should not work with The Quad in all aspects. But is there any good reason why you should not work with The Quad, say on supply chain resilience or health issues?

Secondly, I think, and this is much more relevant to Thailand, and we have talked about this, ASEAN has origins. It was really a maritime mechanism with Thailand as a kind of link between the mainland and the maritime. But I think it is not a sustainable way to go forward, to continue with a very stuck division between the mainland and the maritime. The Mekong region is going to become more and more important. And we need to look at the region holistically, in strategic terms. We have tended to deal with, so far as the Mekong countries

deal with Mekong issues, it as technical issues, from a technical perspective. But I think there are strategic implications. And those strategic implications cannot really be distinguished from the maritime. So, one of the strategic discussions we need to have is how to merge both parts of South East Asia. How to look at it in a holistic way? And that actually connects to the question about the environment that the gentleman at the back alluded to. The one thing that links the maritime with the Mekong is actually the environment. It is a less controversial thing to discuss. We may not be able to make huge progress. I don't think we can. But we can at least conceive of the problem in a way that we can take to our dialogue partners and say look at it this way, instead of just cutting it out into small slices or two slices. That's one thing we can do.

So, I'm not pessimistic about ASEAN's future. I would be much more pessimistic about ASEAN's future if we began to overreach ourselves, if we began to believe our own propaganda and tried to do too much. I'd rather we set strategic goals or some of the goals as you mentioned. I mentioned climate. You mentioned the Five-Point consensus of Myanmar. These are aspirations. You need to have aspirations to set the direction. But how you implement them is going to be subject invariably to the reality of politics both domestic, regional and international. That we all know. But we need really urgently to sit down and have a real strategic discussion of the type we used to have in the 80s and even in the early 90s. We have not had it in the same way for quite a long time and yet the environment is changing rapidly around us. But I think we always need ASEAN.

Ms. Wanalee Lohpechra

Excellencies, my name is Wanalee. I'm from the Foreign Ministry here, working in the department that covers South Asia. I'm wondering whether you can say something more about India and its rising role in the global geopolitical reality. You've mentioned something about The Quad supply chain and maritime mechanism. But can you please say something more on India.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

First of all, India is a continental-sized country. It's actually many countries within one national boundary. Each state is much bigger than many countries. So it's a large complicated and incredibly complicated country. I just came back from India about a week ago. Everytime I go there, it strikes me how complicated that country is. Now a complicated country is always going to spend a lot on its policies, strategic energy, internally rather than externally. But India is now in a sweet spot. And it's benefiting from that sweet spot economically as well as strategically. I think there are things it needs to do more in order to continue to benefit to the fullest extent. Those things are mainly, I think, in its educational system, in its defense procurements, and so on. But it is being done. It will take time. A small country like Singapore can be quite nimble. Since it's small, you can steer it very fast. But a big country like India takes some time to change. But I think the fundamental shift of direction of India has already taken place. Now it's a question of building up the momentum in that direction. It will be playing a bigger and bigger role, not merely in this immediate region but globally. Because India's aspirations have always been global. It's quite normal. It's a huge country.

But as far as India's relations in South East Asia are concerned, I think there's always been a somewhat mismatch of expectations. I don't think many countries in South East Asia really understand India. So sometimes we get impatient. On the other hand, I think India sometimes also gets impatient with South East Asia for not understanding India's constraints, its priorities, and how it defines its interests. But I think it's getting better as the fundamental change of direction has occurred. So, it's a question of working it out. But a big country works at its own pace. That is a fact of life that we have to accept. And a diverse region like South East Asia also responds at its own pace. That's another reality a big country must also accept.

Ambassador Patrick Hemmer

Thank you, Ambassador Bilahari, for your speech. I'm Patrick Hemmer, Ambassador of Luxembourg, one of the founding members of the EU, an organization you're alluded to in your speech a few times. I will not comment directly on the points you made about the EU that will drift us to other areas. But I'd be very interested to have your point of view on one issue. I have seen lately a willingness of both the EU and ASEAN to engage more thoroughly. You alluded to some possible misunderstanding because we have different degrees of integration and we are very different organizations. So, what would be your advise on how to enhance better understanding between these two organizations which would create a good framework for better engagement in the future? Thank you.

Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan

To save time, I'll just be very direct. I think you're right that there's a greater willingness to engage. But I think the better willingness is partially based on the EU to take that willingness forward. We'll have to be based on the premise that the EU will have to abandon its habit of lecturing people and linking all kinds of issues that need not be linked. I think you are slowly moving in that direction but you are what you are. You can't be what you are not. So, I kind of accept that. But in the early days of ASEAN-EU engagement, the biggest obstacle was the tendency of EU colleagues to lecture. Now, there's less tendency to do that. I think partly because the hubris has worn off. The achievements of Europe as well as the limitations are now more apparent to everybody. And, at the same time, the strategic environment has created imperatives for us to work together. I think these developments are healthy but they are not to be taken for granted. Both sides have to work at it.

Dr. Anuson Chinvanno

Thank you very much. I think what Ambassador Bilahari has said in the beginning as well as in the question and answer session is illuminating, as well as direct. I hope that you get some food for thought. You can go back and think about what he said, especially for my younger colleagues here at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and see how we can apply what he has said to our own work. Maybe we need to be more analytical about things and not accept them as they appear. Because Ambassador Bilahari has said quite clearly that there are a lot of things that we tend to look at face value and, even worse, to believe in our own propaganda. So, I think we need to be analytical. I can't speak for all of you, but for me, it is very important that we understand reality. Reality means opportunities and also limitations. So, you need to

know what the limitations are. Once you know that, then you can set the goals and move towards them.

Finally, I like to thank Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan again for being here with us this afternoon and giving us a very interesting one and a half hours.

Annex 1

THE RISK OF CONFLICT IN ASIA

Bilahari Kausikan

Paper for Discussion at India in Asia: Deeper Engagement, Second Annual Conference, 1-3 March 2024

I was tasked with assessing the risk of conflict in Asia. The use or the threat of the use of force is an inherent characteristic of international relations among sovereign states. Therefore, we can never say that there is no risk of conflict in Asia or anywhere else.

Almost 70 years ago, Karl W. Deutsch introduced the idea of a ‘security community’ into the study of international relations. He defined ‘security community’ as a group of states that had become so integrated to the point that there was real assurance that members of that community would not fight each other physically but would settle disputes by other means.¹

By Deutsch’s definition, the only security community is still the one he identified close to 70 years ago – the North Atlantic Area. Even here, the periphery of the North Atlantic – the Balkans and East Central Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (or West Asia) – has seen endemic violence that has had significant destabilizing effects on the core even if it is – so far -- short of war or other forms of inter-state conflict.

Of course, states have often cooperated too. Conflict and cooperation coexist in international relations. But their coexistence is more often than not uneasy. The deepest and most stable form of cooperation – alliance and other means of cooperation to maintain a balance of power – derives from the reality that force or its threat continually lurks not far below the surface civilities of international relations. By contrast, cooperation for the common good, whether that good is the environment, or non-proliferation, or trade, is often fragile.

Certainly, there is no ‘security community’ anywhere in Asia or any of its sub-regions. Yet with only few exceptions, Asian countries have made remarkable progress in almost all metrics of development. Setting aside North America and Europe, Asia is the continent where the most progress has been made in lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty. This apparent contradiction – the continual possibility of conflict coexisting with real material advancement – underscores the imperative of seeing specific conflicts or potential conflicts in perspective, avoiding either overly sanguine or overly dramatic assessments.

We should also bear in mind that many – perhaps most – international issues do not lend themselves to definitive solutions. Even when solutions are possible, the solutions themselves may lead to new sets of problems. Problems can, however, be managed. The management of problems; the mitigation of the risks of conflict inherent in international relations, is one of the most crucial functions of day-to-day diplomacy.

¹ Karl W. Deutsch, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, (Princeton University Press, 1957)

With this as background, let me state my conclusions up front. In Asia, with the exception of West Asia, the risk of conflict by design – war or conflict used as an instrument of policy such as the current wars in Ukraine and Gaza – is low, almost negligible. The real risk is conflict by miscalculation or an accident getting out of hand. This latter risk is not negligible, although – with the exception of Taiwan, not unduly high.

These conclusions are based on two main factors. First, nuclear deterrence. Since 1945 the prospect of mutually assured destruction has kept the peace between nuclear-weapon armed states, with wars fought only between their proxies, the sole exception being the 1999 Kargil war which did not escalate despite Pakistan's defeat and is thus confirmation of the stability of nuclear deterrence. Second, the most crucial priorities of all Asian states are domestic – by which I mean political as well as economic and in the cases of China and North Korea, the two states from which most Asian threats emanate, regime survival which is their most vital interest and foremost priority – and not in the foreign policy domain.² While this does not guarantee that they will eschew external violence, I think they do recognize that such actions are more often than not counter-productive with regard to their most important priorities and vital interests and will not be undertaken lightly.

I will illustrate my conclusions by briefly analyzing three issues: North Korea, the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, and Taiwan.³

North Korea

The prospect of North Korea giving up its nuclear weapon or missile development programmes is zero. Pyongyang's most vital interest is regime survival. This is an existential issue and Pyongyang sees these programmes as indispensable to this goal. There is thus no incentive that can be offered to, or cost that can be imposed on, Pyongyang that can persuade or compel it to give up these programmes because to do so is tantamount to regime change.

China-North Korea relations are infused with deep mutual distrust. Beijing is not enamored with North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile programmes. But North Korea and China are two of only five existing Leninist systems in the world and Beijing's most vital interest is to preserve CCP rule. On this issue, Beijing is completely risk-adverse; indeed, continually insecure. Beijing will not be complicit, however indirectly, in regime change in North Korea because that may give the Chinese people inconvenient ideas about their own

² There is also a strong propensity to see all Asian conflicts or potential conflicts, as a function of US-China strategic competition and Asia only as an arena for their rivalries, as if the countries of the region have no other way of defining their interests. This is understandable. Clearly, US-China rivalry can never be ignored. But the degree to which US-China rivalry is a factor matters more than is commonly acknowledged and requires nuanced assessments. To give an example from Southeast Asia, we commonly assess Laotian and Cambodian relations with China within the framework of US-China competition. But arguably, the relations of both these countries with Vietnam and Thailand are more important, or at least more immediate, considerations for Vientiane and Phnom Penh. Their relations with China and the US are not necessarily independent variables but dependent on their relations with Hanoi and Bangkok.

³ An Indian audience may find it strange that I am not going to talk about the Sino-Indian border disputes that led to war in 1962 and regular episodes of violence in the last decade, or the Indo-Pakistan disputes that have led to 4 major wars in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999 and many smaller scale skirmishes. The reason for these omissions is simple. This audience has forgotten more about these conflicts than I ever will know, and there is nothing I can usefully say about them. Rather than expose my profound ignorance, I look forward to being educated on them by you during discussion time. However, my guess is that the two factors I mentioned earlier – nuclear deterrence and domestic priorities – will probably also hold in these cases, particularly the first.

system. Tolerating North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes is the lesser evil. To expect Beijing to persuade or compel North Korea to give up these programmes is a delusion.

North Korea is, however, rational and can be dealt with in the same way as we deal with all nuclear-weapon states: by deterrence and diplomacy. Despite the regime's habitually inflammatory rhetoric, it is highly improbable that it will again start a war to reunify the Korean Peninsula as it did in 1950 because such a war will almost certainly draw in the US and its allies and would put its most vital interest – regime survival – in jeopardy. The risk is that inflammatory rhetoric about reunification by war may spark a dynamic of escalation that both sides may find difficult to check without grievous political costs. But we should not assume that Kim Jong Un's declaration in January this year that he was renouncing peaceful reunification as a policy goal – symbolized by the destruction of the 'Reunification Arch' – is necessarily an indication that he intends to fight a war of reunification. More likely it is a recognition of the reality of two Koreas and the beginning of a healthy move out of the deep shadows of his father's and grandfather's legacies.

We tend to focus on North Korea's military programmes but Kim Jong Un's ascent to power was marked by the announcement his 'Byungjin' policy which placed equal emphasis on both military and economic development unlike his father's 'Songun' or military first policy. When I last visited Pyongyang in 2013 two years after Kim Jong Un came to power, there were tangible signs of development, undoubtedly more symbolic than anything else, but none the less real. In late February 2024, the North Korean media reported that Kim Jong Un had said he was "ashamed and sorry" for neglecting economic development outside Pyongyang and called for a "rural industrial revolution", acknowledging that achieving this "won't be easy" along with military spending on nuclear weapons.⁴ This may of course be mere lip-service. Still, any sort of 'apology' from any North Korean leader is a rare event and not to be dismissed. Only time will tell whether having made what he considers sufficient progress in his nuclear weapon and missile programmes, Kim Jong Un will return to economics.

Neither North nor South Korea is really interested in reunification. To reduce the risk of miscalculation, it is better that they acknowledge and deal with each other as separate sovereignties and that the US and Japan also recognize North Korea de jure and not just de facto and conclude a peace treaty with it.⁵ This will require South Korea (and Japan) to acquire their own nuclear-weapon capabilities within the American alliance system. The logic of their circumstances has already set them on such a trajectory which will eventually lead to a six-way (US, China, Russia, DPRK, ROK and Japan) nuclear balance of power in Northeast Asia. Although the pathway to such an outcome will certainly be fraught, the end result will be stable. Although denuclearization in any definition of that ambiguous term is not possible, when such a balance is established and North Korea's second-strike capability has developed to the point

⁴ <https://www.nknews.org/2024/02/kim-jong-un-says-hes-ashamed-and-sorry-for-neglecting-economy/>

⁵ I have often heard the argument that for the US or Japan to formally recognize North Korea and conclude a peace treaty is to reward and thus encourage bad behaviour. I do not find such arguments convincing. First of all, rewarding bad behaviour is hardly unknown in international relations generally and on North Korea specifically – what else was the KEDO agreement of 1995? Of course, KEDO did not work as expected but without getting into futile debates about responsibility for its failure – which is more complicated than generally acknowledged – North Korea then had no nuclear-weapons capability. In my view, its development of such a capability, however rudimentary, will fundamentally change its calculations of interests, particularly when it develops a credible second-strike capability vis-à-vis the US, boosting its confidence in regime survival.

when Pyongyang is confident that regime survival is no longer in jeopardy, agreements on non-proliferation and arms-control may become possible.

Maritime Disputes

China's extravagant and legally questionable claims in the East and South China seas serve both strategic and domestic political goals. Strategically, until recently Chinese nuclear submarines had to navigate through the two island chains into the Pacific Ocean for their SLBMs to reach the US, making them vulnerable to interception. The credibility of the most survivable of China's nuclear forces, and hence of its second-strike capability, thus depended on access through the island-chains from the East and South China Seas. China is now reported to have deployed a new generation of SLBMs capable of reaching the US without running the island-chain gauntlet. What ultimate impact this will have on the strategic importance of the East and South China Seas to China's second-strike capability is still unclear. The wartime military utility of the features over which China lays claim, and in the South China Sea has artificially and illegally enhanced, has in any case always been questionable. What is certain is that the political significance of Chinese maritime claims in these waters will be undiminished; that the political significance of the claims is as important as their strategic purpose; and their political significance may well increase over time.

Politically, these claims put flesh on the bare-bones of the strongly nationalist narrative of humiliation, rejuvenation and realizing the China Dream by which the CCP justifies its monopoly of power as the vanguard party. Since the end of the Qing Dynasty, the legitimacy of every Chinese government has rested on its ability to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The CCP has always relied on this narrative, but after Deng Xiaoping's reforms and opening up, and in particular after the admission of businessmen to the Party in 2001, the orthodox ideological justification of class-struggle lost credibility and the CCP was left with no other legitimating narrative. Xi Jinping has used it more insistently than any of his predecessors.

The political importance of this historical narrative to the CCP cannot be overstated. The recovery of territory lost during the period of China's weakness is the central – crucial – element of it. The inconvenient fact is, however, that the most extensive territorial losses were to Imperial Russia and its successor states. Those are beyond even the pretense of recovery. What is left to impress the Chinese people with the CCP's resolve and success in defending China's sovereignty and territorial integrity are Taiwan – which I will deal with separately – and the tiny islands, atolls, shoals and reefs of the East and South China Seas.

The narrative injects a strong element of entitlement into Chinese behaviour and makes diplomatic compromise difficult except as a purely tactical expedient. It is well-nigh impossible for China to significantly modify its behaviour for example by stopping or scaling back its naval and coast-guard deployments in disputed waters. After all, if I am only recovering what is rightfully mine, why should I compromise? Why should I not operate my assets in what is mine? How can I compromise or stop doing so without looking weak to my own people? The CCP is a prisoner of its own narrative which it both uses and fears. Herein lies the risk of an accident getting out of hand. This risk may increase over time. For well-known reasons, China faces a future of uninspiring growth. China is in no danger of collapse or the CCP of losing

power. But there is at least a strong possibility that as growth slows and domestic uncertainties raise the CCP's insecurities, it will act out this narrative even more strongly, at least in relation to the weakest claimants as we have already seen in the case of the Philippines.

This does not mean that China will be reckless. These maritime claims are the closest analogue – thankfully so-far non-kinetic – to the proxy conflicts of US-Soviet Cold War competition. War with the US would place at serious risk China's key interest: CCP rule. It is perhaps the very insignificance of these specks in the water that make them attractive means to advance Beijing's domestic political goals as war over them would be absurd. Still, at a time of domestic uncertainty, China must balance its interest in using these maritime claims for domestic political purposes with its interest in mitigating the risks of competition with the US by stabilizing relations and setting parameters for competition.

Biden and Xi met at the San Francisco APEC summit in November 2023. Preceding and following their meeting, there has been a resumption of US-China high-level contacts and dialogues in various domains. This is all to the good. In particular, military-to-military dialogues reduce the risks of accidents escalating through miscommunication or miscalculation even if they cannot entirely eliminate such risks. From the perspective of US-China competition, the overall situation in the East and South China Seas is a stalemate. China will not significantly modify its behaviour but cannot deter the US and its allies from operating in, through and over these waters or coerce even weak states from giving up their claims. Dangerous incidents have reportedly become less frequent since Xi and Biden met. But what calm as currently exists is still fragile.

Taiwan

Taiwan presents a paradox. The prospect of peaceful – i.e. voluntary – reunification is zero or close to it. Hong Kong's fate has destroyed the credibility of the 'one country, two systems' formula as a model for Taiwan, while geopolitical tensions with the US, China's structural problems, and Xi's efforts to assert CCP control over businesses, has reduced the attractiveness of China's economy. But Taiwan is also the issue which is most central to the CCP's legitimating narrative; Xi Jinping has, on several occasions, said that the China Dream cannot be achieved without reunification and he has set an implicit deadline for realizing the China Dream – the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049. Yet, despite some well-publicized but alarmist and irresponsible statements, including by senior US military leaders, a war of reunification is not imminent, not inevitable, and, at least in my judgement, unlikely.

Beijing will, of course, never renounce the military option. Xi has instructed the PLA to acquire the capability to exercise it by 2027. But we should not mistake capability for intention and I do not think the military option is China's preferred option. There are several reasons for this. Most fundamentally, the PLA simply does not have the capability or the war-fighting experience to exercise it with confidence of success even when it acquires the capability.

The last war the PLA fought was in 1979 against Vietnam, and while its sheer weight ultimately prevailed, it was very much a Pyrrhic victory. Given the systemic corruption in, and continuing purges of, the PLA leadership including in its rocket forces, whether the PLA can

acquire the capability by 2027 or even 2049 is an open question. The disruptions to the rocket force are particularly significant because the indispensable precondition for a successful operation against Taiwan must be the ability to deter direct intervention by the US and its allies as Putin has done in Ukraine.

Equally important, to capture Taiwan by force will require an amphibious operation – the most difficult of all military operations to carry out successfully – on the scale of the Normandy landings during the Second World War. No one has ever done anything like this since then. It will be an immense gamble and one that the CCP cannot afford to lose. No Chinese leader can survive a bungled operation against Taiwan. Given Taiwan's central place in the CCP's legitimating narrative, a failed operation will even shake the roots of CCP rule. The PLA can easily destroy Taiwan. But what is the use of taking over a smoldering rock? Neither is it clear that much as they may support reunification, the Chinese people will swallow the large-scale massacre of people they have for decades had drummed into them are their brothers and sisters.

However, there are two scenarios in which China must fight even if it knows it may lose because no Chinese leader can survive not fighting under these scenarios and CCP rule will be undermined if it does not fight.

The first is a low probability, high impact scenario in which Taiwan revives its ambition of acquiring an independent nuclear deterrent. Taipei harbored such ambitions in the 1970s and was advancing them with the help of Israel until the US found out and put an end to its programme. Still, there is reason to believe that the ambition has never entirely gone away. Given recent developments in American politics, it is not to be taken for granted that the US will necessarily react in the same way if Taiwan revives those ambitions. A nuclear-weapon armed Taiwan, or even Taiwan as a threshold state, means an end to reunification even as a distant aspiration. China must fight.

The second scenario is if Taiwanese domestic politics takes an untoward turn that crosses Chinese red-lines. Unfortunately, this is not a low probability scenario. The issue is not that some Taiwanese politician will unilaterally declare independence. It is unlikely that even the most reckless of politicians will do so because there is no political advantage in doing so. Many polls have shown that there is very little (and declining) public support for the two extremes of independence and reunification. Most Taiwanese want the status quo to continue. At the same time, however, polls also show a growing sense of a Taiwanese Chinese identity that is increasingly detached from the mainland Chinese identity. This is draining 'One China' and the 1992 Consensus on it of any substantive political meaning. The KMT and DPP are converging in this respect.

The corollary to this growing sense of a Taiwanese identity are pressures on both the KMT and DPP to defend Taiwan's de facto 'sovereignty'. Beijing must react to their actions. The PRC coastguard boarding and inspecting a Taiwanese cruise ship after the Taiwanese coastguard caused an accident that killed two PRC nationals on a boat that had intruded into waters near Taiwan-controlled Kinmen Island is a recent case in point. An escalatory dynamic could easily be set in motion that raises the risk of miscalculations or misunderstandings or crossing yet undefined red-lines because Beijing itself may not know what its own red-lines are until incidents occur.

The increase in the frequency of PLA air-force and navy patrols and exercises around Taiwan must increase the statistical probability of accidents, particularly if China steps up grey-zone operations around Taiwan or against features off the Chinese coast or in the South China Sea occupied by Taiwan. Given the sensitivity of the Taiwan issue and the emotions it arouses among Chinese netizens, accidents will be difficult to contain.

The risks of an escalatory dynamic being set in motion by Taiwanese domestic politics are amplified by two trends that have steadily grown in prominence since the end of martial law and the evolution of democratic politics in Taiwan. The first is a decline in the Taiwanese will to defend itself which I do not think the shock of the Ukraine war has reversed. The second is a concurrent rise in Taiwan's sense of entitlement that because it is the only Chinese democracy, the world – or at least that part of it represented by the US and its allies – must come to Taiwan's defense. The interaction of these two trends in the context of Taiwanese domestic politics is troubling, particularly when Taiwanese domestic politics becomes entangled in American domestic politics.

None of any of this, however, is intended to imply that war by design is inevitable. The Taiwan issue may never be resolved but can be managed. Successful management depends on keeping the myth of eventual reunification credibly alive so that China need not feel that it has no option but to use force. This will require tacit collaboration between Beijing, Taipei and Washington. This will be difficult but not impossible. Xi Jinping's implicit deadline of 2049 for achieving the China Dream is a complication but not an insurmountable one. Xi will be 71 this June. In 25 years' time, he will in all probability be dead or at least not in power, and his deadline can be quietly forgotten by a new generation of Chinese leaders. The key is to buy time and prevent the Taiwan issue coming to a head.

The X factor – the unknown and potentially disruptive factor – is the domestic politics of these three countries, particularly in the US. That will in fact be the single most crucial influence on all three issues that I have discussed both in the immediate – this year's presidential election – and over the intermediate and long term. [END]

.

Annex 2

Biography of the Speaker

Mr. Bilahari Kausikan is the Chairman of the Middle East Institute, an autonomous institute of the National University of Singapore. Mr. Kausikan was Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2013, having served as Second Permanent Secretary since 2001. He was subsequently Ambassador-at-Large until May 2018. His earlier appointments at the Ministry include Deputy Secretary for South-east Asia, Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, and Ambassador to the Russian Federation. He was educated at Raffles Institution, the University of Singapore and Columbia University in New York.



Special Talk on

Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN



By Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan

Ambassador-at-Large and former Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore

25 March 2024 | 14.00 - 16.00 hrs.



SCAN FOR
REGISTRATION



NARATHIP AUDITORIUM
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SI AYUTTHAYA RD.

Photos of the Event



The International Studies Center (ISC) aims to encourage the studies and analyses of relevant policies and issues in various aspects of diplomacy and international affairs, including foreign policy, international economics, international law, and international and regional organizations, as well as to create opportunities for policy and issue related discussion for the benefit of the formulation and conduct of diplomacy and foreign policy, while promoting public awareness and understanding of major foreign policy issues, through such activities as lectures, seminars, experts discussion, publications and broadcast.

Seminar Report is a series in ISC's publications which records proceeding from seminars, discussions and book launches organized by the International Studies Center.

ISC Seminar Report Series

Seminar Report

**Book Launch and Discussion | Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power
in Southeast Asia**

by David M. Lampton, Selina Ho and Cheng-Chwee Kuik (Authors)

ISBN 978-616-341-109-9

Seminar Report

**ISC Special Lecture | International Law and Emerging Technologies
by Professor (Emeritus) Vitit Muntarbhorn**

ISBN 978-616-341-146-4

Seminar Report

**Book Launch “Southeast Asia’s Multipolar Future: Averting a New Cold War”
and Seminar “Southeast Asia: Navigating a New Cold War?”**

**by Mr. Thomas Parks (Author), Ambassador Sihasak Phuangketkeow,
Dr. Pipat Luengnaruemitchai and Dr. Cheng-Chwee Kuik**

ISBN 978-616-341-150-1

Seminar Report

**ISC Special Talk | Global Geopolitical Developments: Implications for ASEAN
by Ambassador Bilahari Kuasikan**

ISBN 978-616-341-155-6



INTERNATIONAL STUDIES CENTER (ISC)

The Government Complex (Building B, 8th Floor),
Chaengwatthana Road, Bangkok 10210, Thailand

email: isc@mfa.go.th

website: www.isc.mfa.go.th