

RATIONAL CONVERSATIONS

BILAHARI
KAUSIKAN

China Is
Messing with
Your Mind



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A small city-state cannot insulate itself from the world. A small country is never without agency—the ability to determine its own fate—but it is nevertheless more a price-taker than a price-setter. We must accept that we are exposed and make the best of it, avoiding dangers, while taking advantage of the opportunities. To do so, we must first understand—as clinically, indeed as cold-bloodedly, as possible—the nature of our exposure.

I have identified two interrelated, mutually reinforcing and overarching global trends that I believe are of particular importance for Singaporeans to understand clearly and clinically.

The first is the rise of China. This is a term far more often loosely bandied about than precisely defined or even understood; in fact, it is a trope. A trope is not inaccurate, and China's re-emergence as a major regional and global actor is a geopolitical fact. A trope is an overused but under-examined term, and China's rise is usually described by a simplistic and misleading narrative: misleading because it is simplistic. Let me try to inject some complexity into our understanding of the term.

China's rise is both a symptom and consequence of a far broader and more complex reordering of international order. For those of us born

in the 1950s, 1960s or earlier, the most important geopolitical event of our adult lives was the end of the Cold War. In a historical instant—miraculously, without much bloodshed—the international structure that, directly or indirectly, and irrespective of whether or not we were conscious of it, shaped almost every facet of our lives for decades, suddenly dissolved. What will replace it is not yet clear. Despite its many dangers, the Cold War international order was clear and simple: binary in structure. You were either on one side or another. Even if you tried or pretended to be non-aligned, you essentially defined yourself in relation to this binary structure. This entrenched a mode of thought, a binary view of the world, that is still a powerful, if usually unconscious, but inappropriate influence on how we understand the term “China's rise”.

To state my essential argument upfront, China's rise is not necessarily America's decline. The post-Cold War world is complex, not binary. US-China relations are, of course, the most important bilateral relationship in the world. But after the Cold War, all major power relationships are no longer only one thing or another. The US and China are not natural partners, nor are they inevitable enemies. Their relationship is simultaneously profoundly interdependent in a way that is historically unique between major powers, and infused with deep strategic mistrust. No matter how a relationship may be described—"alliance" or "strategic partnership", or even if no label is attached—to some degree, ambivalence characterises almost every major power relationship.

For example, US-Japan relations, Europe-Russia relations, US-ROK relations,

Sino-Japanese relations, China-India relations, China-Russia relations and US-Russia relations among other combinations.

Neither the US nor China finds their ambivalent relationship comfortable. The Trump administration's approach towards trade reflects this discomfort; so does President Xi Jinping's attempt to find an alternative to China's interdependence with the US through his Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). And yet the BRI and China's rise both rest on the foundation of post-Cold War, American-led globalisation. Can the BRI succeed if the US and China stumble into a trade war or the world turns protectionist? I do not think so.

China was the main beneficiary of post-Cold War globalisation; it may well be the main loser if that order frays because America under the

Trump administration no longer embraces an open and generous definition of leadership. It is important to recognise that Mr Trump is a symptom, not a cause. Like Mr Obama before him, he is a reaction to the hubris that contaminated American policy after the end of the Cold War. Without the balance imposed by the Soviet alternative, the American idea was taken to extremes. When taken to extremes, even the worthiest idea becomes self-subverting.

Hubris drew the US into interminable wars in the Middle East, leading to public disillusionment with the traditional political establishment and traditional American values. When Mr Obama spoke of change, he was not primarily speaking about change abroad but change at home; in other words, about putting “America First”. Mr Obama and Mr Trump are different

iterations of the post-Cold War metamorphosis of American values. Without the existential challenges of the Cold War, why should Americans bear any burden or pay any price? It is time to put one’s own house in order. This is not a retreat from the world, but it implies a different concept of American leadership.

Mr Trump is not an aberration that will pass with the next administration. He is a correction to the extremes of the immediate post-Cold War; perhaps an over-correction, but democracies almost always over-correct. His successor may be less flamboyant and more predictable. But the probability is that whoever succeeds Mr Trump will represent, at least in some degree, the same political phenomenon.

The universality of the American model, particularly in its political aspects, was always a



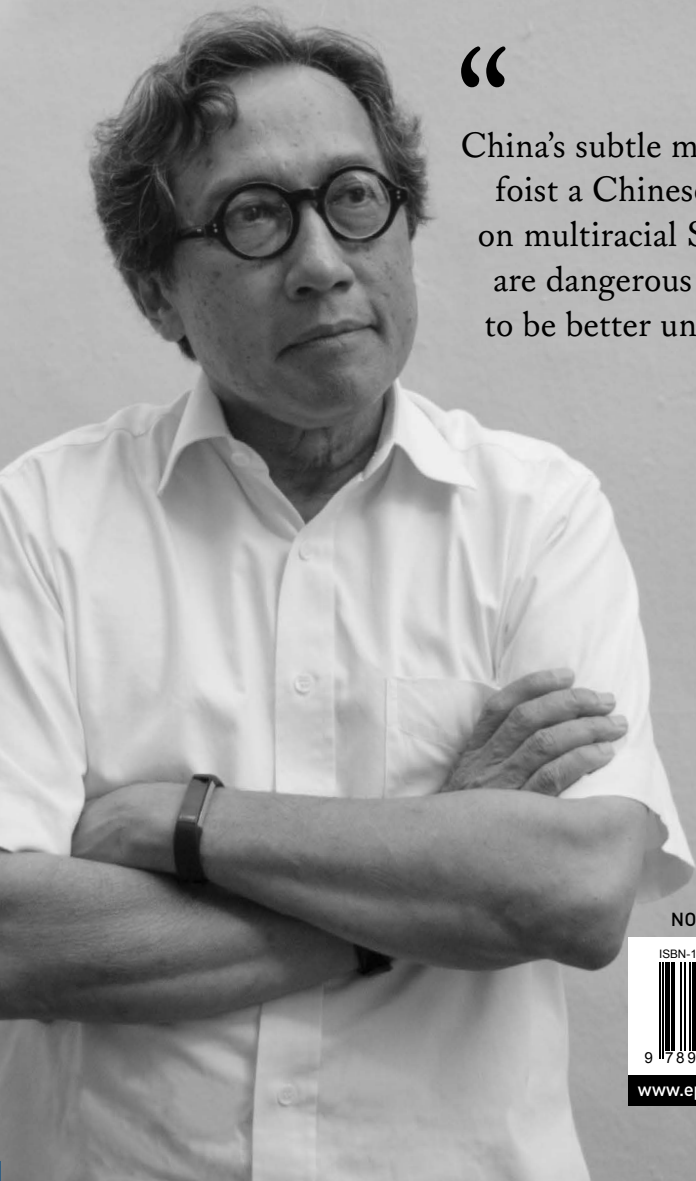
Bilahari Kausikan chairs the Middle East Institute, an autonomous institute of the National University of Singapore. From 2001 to 2013, he was first, the second Permanent Secretary, and then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was subsequently Ambassador-at-Large until May 2018. He had previously served in a variety of appointments in the ministry, including as the Deputy Secretary for Southeast Asia, the Permanent Representative to the United Nations and as Ambassador to the Russian Federation. Raffles Institution, the University of Singapore and Columbia University in New York all attempted to educate him.

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