

Students, civil servants, can be better schooled in foreign policy realities: Bilahari



Bilahari Kausikan speaking at a panel discussion on January 26, 2015. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

PUBLISHED JUL 3, 2015, 9:27 PM SGT



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SINGAPORE - As competition between the United States and China intensifies in the years ahead, Singapore has to retain its ability to chart a nuanced position, veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan said on Friday.

Singapore's foreign policy realities and history could be better reflected in National Education, and civil servants need to be better trained in its geopolitical priorities, he added at a conference on Singapore at 50 and beyond organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Mr Kausikan warned of signs that some domestic groups - whether opposition parties or anti-establishment activists - have shown a willingness to exploit foreign policy issues for their own gain.

"One opposition party has attempted to use our Middle East policies and relations with our neighbours for political advantage (while) some anti-establishment types - so-called activists - have tried to use our ASEAN policy to fan public discontent over foreign labour," said Mr Kausikan, who is an ambassador-at-large and policy adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

These attempts have come to nothing because they were "clumsily executed" and the public is still largely disinterested in foreign policy, he noted.

But sustained public indifference is neither guaranteed nor a desirable state of affairs, he said, adding that the best inoculation against foreign attempts at domestic interference is an educated public.

More could also be done in schools, he added: "We have an elaborate National Education system, but it is ritualised and arguably, in its present form, provokes as much cynicism as it fosters understanding."

Mr Bilahari also called for improvements so civil servants better understand the impact of their decisions on foreign relations.

How Singapore positions itself depends not on big decisions alone, but is also the consequence of small actions across a wide spectrum of policy areas that add up, he said: "The international agenda is today too diverse, too broad, and the boundary between foreign and domestic politics more porous than ever before."

Fellow panelist Jia Qingguo, Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, said a rising China will have interests that are increasingly aligned with that of America, from protecting the environment to dealing with terrorism, drug trafficking and humanitarian disasters.

"While we should not under-estimate the ability of human beings to engage in bad things such as conflicts, we should not underestimate the ability of human beings to engage in good things such as cooperation," he added.