

Weathering challenges ahead: Clarity of thought is critical



Most Singaporeans have a poor understanding of America's strengths and China's weaknesses, and this leads to distortions of judgment, says the author. PHOTO: REUTERS



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Singaporeans are taking a greater interest in international affairs - as they should - but greater interest is not matched by greater understanding and that is particularly so with regard to the foremost challenge of our time: [US-China strategic competition](#).

Too many Singaporeans seem to have bought into the trope of the 21st century being the Asian century - "Asia" being a polite way to refer to China - just as the 20th century was the so-called American century. This trope and the related idea tirelessly propagated by Beijing and its apologists, that the East is rising and the West declining, are [drastic and dangerous simplifications of a far more complex reality](#).

Except for a relatively short and historically anomalous period between circa 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and circa 2008 when the global financial crisis broke out, American leadership was never uncontested through most of the 20th century, just as China's leadership is being contested and will continue to be challenged as the 21st century unfolds, largely due to Beijing's mistakes, primarily the premature abandonment of Deng Xiaoping's sage approach of 'hiding your light and biding your time'. This is dangerous.

Professor Wang Jisi of Beijing University, China's foremost scholar of international relations, recently felt the need to warn his compatriots against believing that America was in absolute decline. The US, he argued, had only declined relatively against China and was still the predominant power against all others.

Similarly, most Singaporeans have a poor understanding of America's strengths and China's weaknesses and tend to downplay both. In truth, neither country is 10 feet tall and both have their own strengths and their own weaknesses. All this leads to distortions of judgment, which are a liability at a time when foreign policy needs more than ever before to be supported by an informed and united public.

We live in an age where politics everywhere is increasingly identity politics and subject to a variety of external influences, many state-sponsored. The consequence is often confusion over our fundamental national interests at a time when clarity of thought is more than usually crucial. This sorry state of affairs represents a failure of our intelligentsia who have either retreated into the ivory tower or amplified the distortions due to their own biases or in the cynical hope of securing some advantage. It also represents the failure of the political class - both those in office and those in opposition - to explain the issues clearly and courageously.

In the final analysis, to deal with the more complex external environment, we must better manage this domestic challenge which is essentially a political challenge. If we can meet this domestic political challenge, I have no doubt that we can deal with the external environment. After all, we have dealt with more dangerous and complicated external challenges at a time when we had far less at our disposal.

Singapore has never been better prepared in material terms. What we need is the intellectual clarity and courage to use the tools at our disposal.

- Mr Bilahari Kausikan, a former permanent secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is chairman of the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore.

Correction note: An earlier version of this article said Mr Bilahari is director of the Middle East Institute (MEI). This is incorrect. He is chairman of the MEI.