

James Crabtree interviews [Bilahari Kausikan](#)

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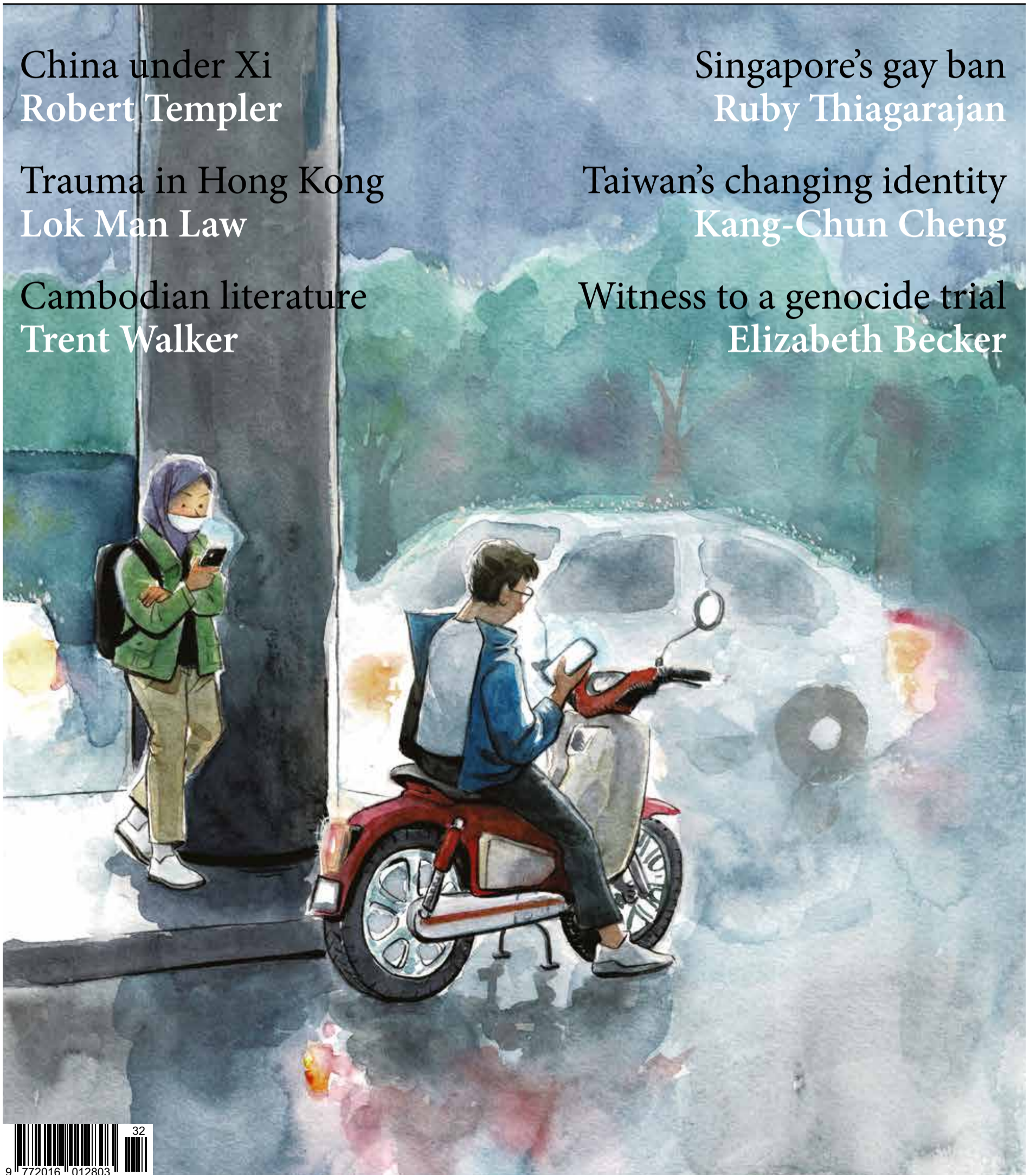
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Few Asian geopolitical observers are as controversial or as widely quoted as Bilahari Kausikan. After nearly four decades as a diplomat, Bilahari—as he is always known—now acts as roving Singaporean intellectual, willing to speak truths from which others in Southeast Asia often shy away. His is a blunt and unsentimental brand of realpolitik in the tradition of Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, a leader for whom he worked as a young foreign service officer.

Born to an ethnically Chinese mother and an Indian-born diplomat father, Bilahari grew up in Singapore, his childhood interspersed with trips to visit his father on diplomatic postings in Australia and Indonesia, where he served during the 1963 to 1966 Konfrontasi period of conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia—a period that also saw Singapore's own independence from Malaysia in 1965. Having left school and university, Bilahari tried his hand first as an academic, studying for a PhD at Columbia, then dabbled in journalism. Eventually he followed his father into Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs—although he says he did so only accidentally, having run out of better options.

Bilahari's undiplomatic views did little to limit his career, which went on to include ambassadorial roles in Russia and at the United Nations in New York. Back home he eventually became permanent secretary of Singapore's foreign ministry, before taking his place as part of a select band of elder statesmen named 'ambassadors-at-large'. A prolific writer, he has also released two collections of essays and articles, *Singapore Is Not an Island: Views on Singapore Foreign Policy* and *Dealing with an Ambiguous World*. Having retired from diplomacy, he now runs Singapore's Middle East Institute, although he is just as often to be found holding court with international visitors over a whiskey at the bar of the city-state's Four Seasons.

You are often viewed as holding an arch-realist view of foreign policy. Is that fair?

I wouldn't describe myself as an adherent of any particular school of international relations. From an analytical point of view, yes, I'm a realist in the spirit of a thinker like Hans Morgenthau. But an ultra-realist view can also not be very realistic. It often means that if you are from a small country you feel you shouldn't do anything because it's all futile in a world of big powers. That is not the experience of Singapore. That's not my own personal experience. There is always some agency. It's how you choose to exercise it. But the starting point must be a cold-blooded, clinical view of the world as it is, not as you hope or fear it to be.

So how is the world? How would you describe it?

This is still an interstate world, and states act in their own interests. International organisation, international law, these are tools. They are—if you want to put it a little bit starkly—myths we choose to believe in so that we can occasionally live in a civilised manner, rather than in a brute state of nature ... I think the best description was Hedley Bull's phrase the 'anarchical society'. Here there are still some rules even in the most extreme state of anarchy, which is war—and by and large people comply with these rules most of the time.

How did your upbringing lead you to develop these ideas?

I came from a family that was on the fringe of politics. My father was in the first generation



Bilahari Kausikan taking questions at an event in Singapore, March 2018

of Singapore diplomats. When Singapore became unexpectedly independent in 1965 we had to form a foreign service on the fly. My father, who was a teacher and a broadcaster, was one of those Indian nationalists that were really upset by partition, and so he got fed up with India and left. He was on his way to Indonesia to join the Indonesian Nationalist Revolution when he ran out of money, and to my good fortune ended up in Singapore. I was born and up until 1963, when I was halfway through primary school, I was a British subject. Then I became a Malaysian citizen. Then I became a Singapore citizen. Those were quite desperate times for Singapore, which focused the mind on what was essential and what was not fluff.

You published a collection of essays entitled *Singapore Is Not an Island*. What did you mean?

Some Singaporeans then and now believe that what happens around us is of no concern to us. But you are involved, by just virtue of being here ... If you look at the majority of small countries in the UN, they are not very viable states. Singapore was lucky. We were a viable city-state before we were independent or sovereign. But we still have to be clear about what our interests are in every situation. For instance, we need to keep this animal called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] going, despite its best efforts to destroy itself. And we also do what we can to promote international relationships based on rules rather than brute force. The reason we have recently taken a strong position on Ukraine is exactly the same reason we took a strong position against the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.

Why did Singapore condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

My generation of diplomats' formative experience was the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1978. We as Singapore strongly opposed that. A big country invading a smaller country just because they didn't agree with them or didn't like them is a big problem for a small country like Singapore, surrounded by neighbours with whom our relationship is always troublesome. Our view with Ukraine was basically the same. The experience of Vietnam and Cambodia gave all of us a different view of diplomacy, which was not just about being pleasant, agreeable and

tactful, but of fighting for your interests. And of course, this was the Cold War, and diplomacy then really wasn't all about being nice.

Is the world entering a new Cold War?

It's not a new Cold War because the US and China are competing within a single system. It's not competition between two different systems, and that has many implications, which are not all bad. It is not likely to end in any clear-cut denouement, because that means the destruction of the system. And I think while both of them would like to dominate the system, they don't particularly want to destroy it because they both benefit from it. So while it's much more complicated, it is no less but no more dangerous than what we have survived in the past. And if we keep our nerve and keep a cool head and a clinical way of looking at the world, I see no reason why we should not merely just survive, but also prosper in a modest way, as we did during the Cold War. And that's true of all countries in Southeast Asia.

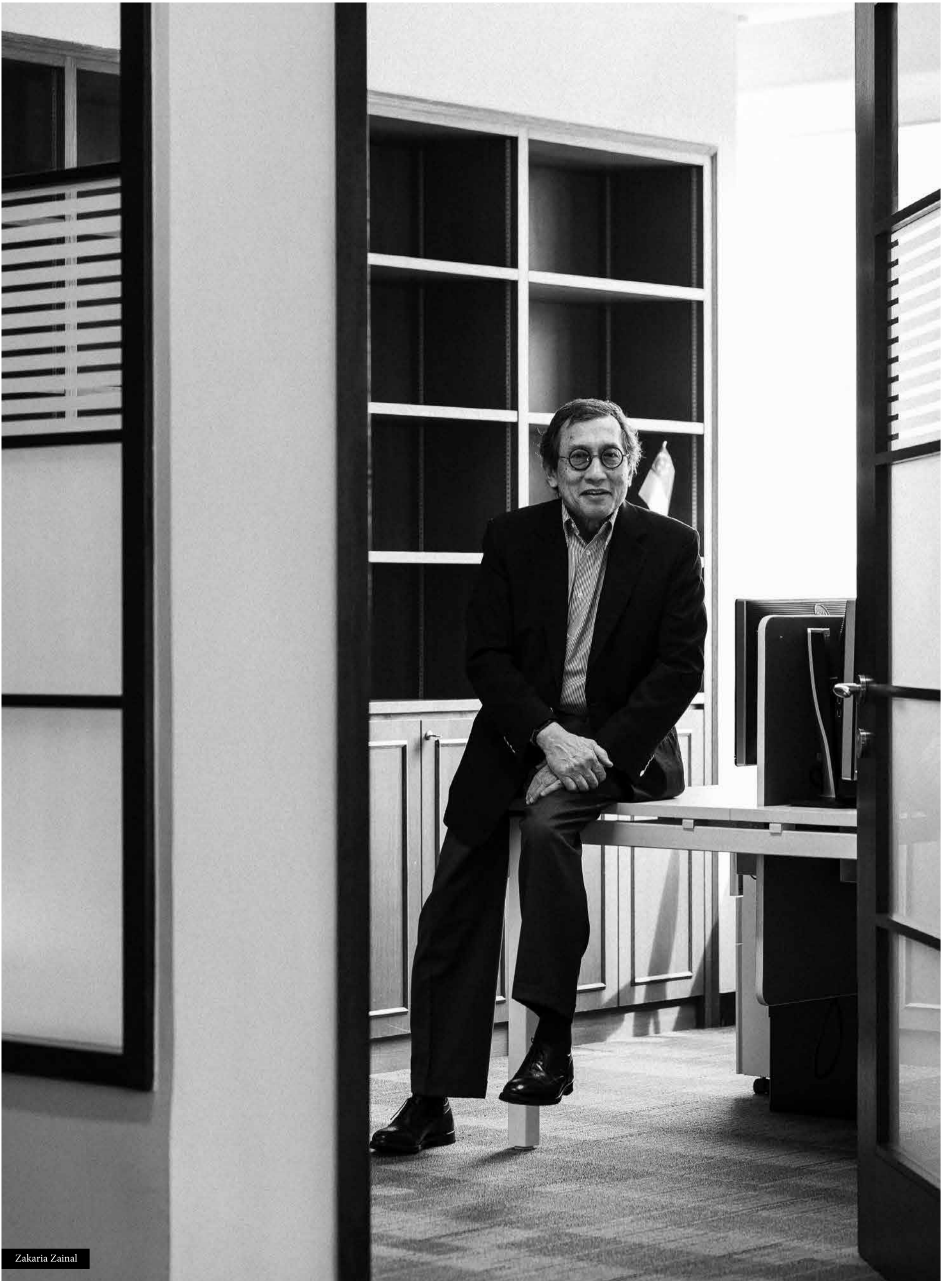
So what is the outlook for Southeast Asia in this new era?

Our region became a success story in an earlier era of geopolitical competition. We managed that era and we can manage now, if we keep our sense of hard-headed, clinical realism, which I fear is being lost. And it is being lost partly because we have had an outbreak of democracy in Southeast Asia.

We did all those hard things when we were five or six countries in ASEAN, and none of us was a democracy. Today we may not meet the Western definition of democracy, but even Leninist states like Vietnam and Laos are more pluralistic than before. And certainly Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines are democracies. And the kind of leaders that now come to the fore are swayed by different things than they used to. I'm not saying that we should all cease to be democracies, because you cannot move backwards. But it does mean that your foreign policy, the way you calculate your interests, gets contaminated by sentimental considerations, shall we say.

How should small countries navigate this new era of great power competition?

If you are a small country, there are two bad scenarios. One is conflict. If war breaks out between



Zakaria Zainal

the US and China, there is no room to exercise agency. Being neutral is not an option. You look at what happened to Royalist Cambodia and Royalist Laos during the Vietnam War. They tried to be neutral. They were just swept away. But the second problem is condominium, meaning that if there's a G2 world between the US and China, there's no room to manoeuvre either. It doesn't matter whether you're in an American sphere or a Chinese sphere. If they tell you to do something, you have to do it. So, for those of us in small states, a certain degree of competition is not a bad thing.

You once argued that ASEAN should expel Cambodia and Laos for being too close to China. Why?

The idea of ASEAN is not that you have to give up your national interests. If Cambodia thinks their national interests takes them in the direction of China, so be it. But some part of your definition of national interest must consider regional interests. And if you don't, then you don't belong in a regional organisation. That was my point.

ASEAN is going through a very bad phase. How we have dealt with Myanmar was good up to a point, but then we became a little bit soft-headed. We may well admit Timor-Leste next year, which would be a huge mistake, because Timor-Leste is a basket case. So ASEAN will have a basket case in the south called Timor-Leste and a basket case in the north called Myanmar. How is this clear thinking?

Where does that leave you on the outlook for Southeast Asia?

It's going to be more complicated. We are going to make mistakes. We already made one on Myanmar. But they are not, so far at least, fatal mistakes. What people call 'ASEAN centrality' is going to be there only as a formality. What does centrality mean in its essence? It means being useful. You are useful to ASEAN members to manage relations with each other but also useful in international relations with external powers that have interest in Southeast Asia. We are now much less useful in that second sense than we were, because alternatives forums like the Quad [the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of Australia, India, Japan and the United States] are developing.

The kind of hard-headed realism Bilahari exhibits will be needed more than ever in an era marked by rising great-power politics, most obviously the rivalry between the US and China. Here Singapore plays an unusual role, given the city-state's good relations with both powers. Its foreign service is well-regarded by players outside the region, seeking understanding of developments in Southeast Asia in particular; Bilahari himself is often courted by visiting diplomats, journalists and business leaders keen for unvarnished insights on the latest geopolitical developments.

Concerns about a looming Sino-US clash have risen both in Singapore and elsewhere in the aftermath of US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in September. This context places Singapore in a complex position, not least given the fact that its domestic population is roughly three-quarters ethnic Chinese. Some of its intellectual class generally welcomes China's rise, including Kishore Mahbubani, the former diplomat, and George Yeo, the former foreign minister. But Bilahari, sixty-eight, is more circumspect, arguing that both Singapore and the wider region should maintain close ties to the US and be willing to be critical in public of China's foreign policy and its leadership, where others tend to remain silent.

How do you view rising competition between the US and China?

It's a new structural reality. It's not going to go away. There will be periods of high intensity. There will be periods of low intensity. You hope that they would put what the Biden administration calls 'guardrails' on their

competition. But it's also important to understand that competition is the natural state of affairs. Many people mistook an unusual period of world history for the norm between 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, and 2008, when the financial crisis broke out. But for most of the twentieth century, international order was contested. Now a lot of instincts we used to navigate that earlier period have become flabby. We'll need to relearn those things. And we have to do it in a hurry.

Will China invade Taiwan?

Xi Jinping is one of the worst foreign-policy emperors China has ever had. He has made several big mistakes. One has been to put a timeline on reunification. Reunification is at the centre of the 'China Dream'. It has been so since Mao Zedong's time. What is new is Xi has used that narrative of humiliation and rejuvenation more consistently, and put an implicit timeline for it with the hundredth anniversary of the formation of PRC [People's Republic of China] in 2049. But by putting the timeline you are putting pressure on yourself. Time is not on China's side, given the Taiwanese identity is growing much stronger.

I take comfort in a simple fact. Xi Jinping is almost to the day one year older than me. 2049 is twenty-seven years in the future. Where will I be twenty-seven years in the future? The answer is probably dead, and if not dead, not really compos mentis. That is probably his fate too. And, whoever succeeds him—and there will be a successor, even if not in the near future—might quietly forget about this implicit timeline.

What would make Xi decide to invade?

Putin will survive the bungle over Ukraine, but I don't think any Chinese leader can survive a bungled takeover of Taiwan. So, if you fight, you must win. That said, there are two circumstances where, even if you think you're going to lose, you have to fight. One is a unilateral declaration of independence by Taiwan. The other is Taiwan reviving the idea they had in the 1970s of acquiring a nuclear capability. I don't think they ever abandoned the idea. China will tolerate a nuclear Japan. They'll tolerate a nuclear South Korea, even a nuclear Australia. But it cannot tolerate a nuclear Taiwan because that means the end of the China Dream even as an aspiration, or the end of the reunification dream, even as aspiration. In these two circumstances, they will have to fight.

As China rises, you believe more states in Asia will go nuclear. Why?

Nuclear deterrence is actually one reason to be optimistic about the future. China is rapidly modernising its nuclear force. This upsets Americans. But I don't think it should upset Americans. It's quite natural for any nuclear power to want a better second-strike capability. And that is stabilising, in the end. So, I think in our lifetime Japan and South Korea will go nuclear. They're not eager, because it's going to be divisive. But the logic of their circumstances is pushing them.

North Korea is not going to give up its nuclear capability, nor is it going to conveniently collapse. This means that extended US deterrence is going to be eroded sooner or later, as it was in Europe many decades ago. Charles de Gaulle's question will then be asked in Asia. Is San Francisco going to be sacrificed to save Tokyo or Seoul? Obviously not. After the Cold War, America does not face any more existential threat. China is a peer competitor, but it need not be an existential threat. So, countries like Japan and South Korea will need deterrence. And for that they will need nuclear weapons. Australia might too.

What drives Xi's foreign policy ambitions?

The Chinese Communist Party is a Leninist vanguard party that claims a monopoly of power because, in theory, it says it represents the motive force of history, the proletariat and so on. Now, who believes that kind of shit anymore? Nobody. Maybe a few Western academics. But certainly nobody in China.

The legitimating narrative is in fact that of an ethno-nationalist narrative of humiliation, rejuvenation and achieving the China Dream. That infuses Chinese foreign policy with a very strong sense of revanchist entitlement: 'What I am doing in the South China Sea is my entitlement. This was mine. I lost it when I was weak. I want it back.' So is it very hard for the Chinese to compromise, even assuming they want to, without looking weak, because they already said 'this is mine'. That leads them to all kinds of behaviour, foreign behaviour and so on, that is not in their interest. But it's basically domestically driven.

If there was a conflict or a war between the US and China, what would Singapore do?

I have been asked that question many, many times. Singapore's answer, always sincerely, is it depends. If China launches an unprovoked attack against Taiwan, that's one scenario. If Taiwan does something stupid, like unilaterally declare independence, that's different. And we can't say in advance. We will try to stay out of it. But I don't think staying out of it is really an option.

You've been outspoken about the risks of Chinese influence operations, particularly in Singapore.

Xi claims all Chinese at home and abroad should support the China Dream. And that's very troublesome. For Singapore it's an existential danger, because it does have some resonance. It undermines the fundamental basis of the organising idea of Singapore, which is a multiracial society based on meritocracy, not ethnic or religious hierarchy, and in this we are unique in this whole region.

The Chinese fundamentally do not understand Singapore. For them a country whose majority population is of Chinese ethnic origin must be a Chinese country. But in Singapore we are multiracial, not Chinese. If they tell our people they should share the China Dream, they're actually out to capture Singapore. But they don't realise that what they do to try to capture Singapore could destroy Singapore. This danger doesn't happen in other Southeast Asian countries because Chinese are a minority.

Do you think Singaporeans generally view China more favourably than the US?

Singapore's Chinese population can be divided roughly into three. There are some good, old-fashioned Chinese chauvinists. They think it's a really good idea that Singapore should be a Chinese country, and it's about time. I don't think they're very numerous, but they do exist. On the other end of the spectrum—and this is where there is hope for the future—there is a growing number of younger Singaporeans who believe that we should be a multiracial society. The vast majority of the ethnically Chinese population of Singapore are then what I call 'ethnic sentimentalists'. They don't think very much about international relations or politics. So, China comes and tells them, 'Look, why are you making a fuss about the South China Sea? We're all Chinese together. Why are you supporting the white man against me?' It's a stupid argument but it has some resonance. This kind of thing for us is a problem that can never be resolved. It has always to be managed.

How should Singapore maintain its independence?

It has to be managed by being alert. By having people like me expose things. By drawing a few red lines. When Singapore leaders or officials talk to China officially, we use English, just to make sure that everybody knows we are different. But it is a struggle with no end. Just as in our relations with our neighbours, this idea of multiracialism is the diametric opposite of how they organise their societies. And it can't be helped. It is just the existential condition of being Singaporean. □

James Crabtree is executive director of the Asia branch of the International Institute for Strategic Studies based in Singapore