

India-S'pore can navigate new world order

V.K. SANTOSH KUMAR

Veteran Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan said in New Delhi on Monday that India and Singapore may find it relatively easier than most other countries to navigate the new world order “because what is required is largely already our diplomatic modus operandi”.

He was delivering the third Atal Behari Vajpayee Memorial Lecture, titled *The Future Of Global Uncertainty*, in the Indian capital.

The lecture series, organised by India’s Ministry of External Affairs, pays tribute to Mr Vajpayee, who immensely contributed to crafting India’s foreign policy both as external affairs minister and prime minister.

Earlier speakers at the forum were India’s former defence and finance minister Arun Jaitley and former President Pranab Mukherjee.

Mr Kausikan, however, cautioned that Singapore and India “will have to ensure that our institutions and perhaps even more importantly, our politics remain agile and courageous enough to continually adapt to this fluid emerging order”.

According to the 69-year-old chairman of Middle East Institute at National University of Singapore, competition between the United States and China would create shifts in the major order.

“While the rivalry between the two superpowers would undoubtedly create tensions in the world, complex inter-dependencies will remain between them,” he said in the lecture, whose proceedings were presided over by India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

“I think it (India-Singapore) is a good relationship that, despite occasional hiccups, is essentially stable and mutually beneficial. But we should not be content with the current state and must continually think of ways to move it forward.”

– Mr Bilahari Kausikan (right)

PHOTO: MFA

“This mix of shared interests but also divergences will create a mixed order that is driven by looser alliances and fluid alignments between nations.”

Mr Kausikan, who served as Singapore’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Russia, Finland, Canada and Mexico before taking charge of the Foreign Ministry, pointed out that “no country can avoid engaging with the US and China, who are not entirely trusted”.

But it will “require strategic autonomy” to deal with them.

“Even the closest of allies are moving in that direction,” he said.



“This does not mean that alliances or less formal arrangements will break up, but they will become loose as countries will want to preserve the widest possible range of options for themselves.

“Few, if any, countries will commit to aligning themselves across the entire range of issues with any single major power. This will encourage the natural multi-polarity of a diverse world, and certainly our region.”

To successfully navigate this emerging system will require a fundamental shift of mindset and approach that not every country will find comfortable,

added Mr Bilahari, whose connection with India goes back to his father, diplomat P.S. Raman, who was born in the Madras Province before India’s independence.

After the end of World War II and India’s independence in 1947, Mr Raman settled in Singapore and became one of the island-nation’s first generation of diplomats. He served as Singapore’s Ambassador to Indonesia, Australia and Russia.

“I believe India and Singapore may find it relatively easier than most because what is required is largely already our diplomatic modus operandi,” said Mr Bilahari.

He added in an email to *tabla!*: “I think we can deal with it provided we do not lose sight of our fundamental interests and understand that we always have agency.

“For Singapore, we need to get our domestic politics right so as to stay focused on our fundamental interests and to retain the agility and courage to use our agency to advance our interests.”

He added that India and Singapore are both part of the world economy and inter-dependence is vital for both.

“India is a continent in itself. Of course they have a role to play – regionally and globally. It is a geopolitical fact you cannot ignore. It is also a huge market with a young population,” he told *tabla!*.

“I think it is a good relationship that, despite occasional hiccups, is essentially stable and mutually beneficial. But we should not be content with the current state and must continually think of ways to move it forward.”

➔ santosh@sph.com.sg