

Bilahari Kausikan: Ignorance of History and Precarious Support for Pessimist Realism

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In a webinar organized by ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute the former Singaporean top diplomat, Mr. Bilahari Kausikan, suggested that, if necessary, ASEAN may have to expel Cambodia and Laos from the regional association for their role as China's proxies. Mr. Bilahari went on to claim that close connection between Laos, Cambodia and China has not only undermined ASEAN's unity but could potentially bring Laos and Cambodia to their darkest periods of the 1970s. There have been many reactions to assertions made by Mr. Bilahari during that webinar. It suffices to opine on two points: *his ignorance of historical facts and precarious support for pessimist realism.*

Let's first examine Mr. Bilahari's statement that, "To state things bluntly, I see Cambodia and Laos teetering precariously on the edge of making a parallel mistake as that which led to very tragic results for their countries in the late 1960s and 1970s. That mistake is to entrust what agency they have to an external power or trying to be passively neutral." This assertion is tantamount to blaming the victim. During this period, two intertwining factors—which were beyond Cambodia's control—contributed to the tragic results that Mr. Bilahari referred to. The first was the escalation of the war in Vietnam. Vietnamese communist guerrilla warfare

against the armed forces of United States and its South Vietnamese allies spilled over into Cambodia. Against Cambodia's firm proclamation of neutrality, these forces repeatedly violated Cambodia's sovereignty. Second, as a way to deter "the domino effect," the governments of the United States and South Vietnam sought alternative leadership to Sihanouk in Cambodia. To achieve this objective, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency supported the right in Cambodia to launch a coup d'état against Prince Sihanouk.¹ The U.S. warplanes then intensified their bombings of Cambodia, dropping approximately 539,129 tons of ordinance, three times more explosives than those that were dropped on Japan during World War II.² From then on, Cambodia's history experienced downward spiral, hitting year zero under the Khmer Rouge. This outcome was not the result of the decisions made by Cambodian leadership, as is Mr. Bilahari's misconstrued allegation. Rather Cambodia's dark times were the outcomes, as Mr. Shawcross had convincingly illustrated it as the "sideshow" of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's destructive actions; sacrificing the lives and sovereignty of an independent country to bolster their misconceived strategy of containing the spread of communism.

¹ Kenton Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000: A Troubled Relationship* (New York: Psychology Press, 2004).

² David Ablin, and Marlowe Hood, eds. *The Cambodian Agony* (Routledge, 1987); William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia* (Simon & Schuster, 1979).

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The second point that I would like to highlight is Mr. Bilahari's inclination toward pessimist realism. Moises Naim, the editor of *Foreign Policy*—an influential American policy journal—has labelled China as a “rogue state.”³ To the American political establishment, the logical policy option for the United States and, for that matter, the rest of the world is to contain China. The characterization of China as a rogue state is informed by realist pessimism which claims China's unprecedented growth and large economy will lead it to dominate over other countries to advance its own interests in a zero-sum exchange with the world.

Given its rapid and sustainable economic growth and based on its own economic development experience, China has entered into the international aid industry. The political establishment in the U.S. has been quick to criticize the Chinese development aid model. Moises Naim further opined:

Because their goal is not to help other countries develop. Rather, they are motivated by a desire to further their own national interests, advance an ideological agenda, or sometimes line their own pockets. Rogue aid providers couldn't care less about the long-term well-being of the population of the countries they “aid.”⁴

It is dangerous for Mr. Bilahari to fall succumb into this pessimist realist view. Mr. Bilahari's remarks at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute make it sound as if developing countries such as Cambodia, or for that matter the whole world, are getting a raw deal from China. In fact, China's aid aligns with recipient countries' development goals and strategies for developing key infrastructures such as roads, bridges

and power-plants.⁵ These are crucial ingredients for economic take-off. Despite being imperfect, the benefits of China's aid, investment and trade have greatly benefited Cambodia, permitting it to integrate economically to the regional and global economies. Other developing countries have also shared similar positive experiences to Cambodia.⁶

Moreover, a rising China has contributed to world peace. China has played by the international norms, acting as a responsible global player. It has not gone to war with any country since 1979 and has not engaged in any proxy war as other major powers have done. Furthermore, China has become an instrumental member of the United Nations and the world community. It should also be noted that during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, China offered a billion-dollar loan to Thailand. It also agreed to not devalue its currency to prevent further deterioration of the financial situation in Southeast Asia. In the same year, China also cooperated with ASEAN's initiative to create a common pool fund with contributions from ASEAN+3, which included ASEAN, China, South Korea, and Japan. This fund was designed to help the region deal with future financial crises.⁷

China's role as a responsible global player has also been evident with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While the U.S. has adopted an isolationist foreign policy, including a planned withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO), China has pursued a multilateral approach to address the pandemic. China has increased its funding to the WHO, signaling its aim to support existing multilateral institutions. Furthermore, China has also been active in sharing information on its experiences in testing

³ ⁴ Naim, Moises. 2009. “Rogue Aid,” *Foreign Policy*, 15 October. Accessed: 11 May 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/rogue-aid/>.

⁵ See, for example, Sato, Jin, Hiroaki Shiga, Takaaki Kobayashi, and Hisahiro Kondoh. 2011. ““Emerging Donors” from a Recipient Perspective: An Institutional Analysis of Foreign Aid in Cambodia,” *World Development* 39 (12): 2091-2104.

⁶ Dambisa Moyo, *Dead aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is A Better Way for Africa* (London: Macmillan, 2009).

⁷ Rana, Pradumna. 2002. *Monetary and Financial Cooperation in East Asia: The Chiang Mai Initiative and Beyond*. Manila: Asian Development Bank. Accessed: 15 May 2020. https://web.archive.org/web/20101206173441/http://www.adb.org/Documents/ERD/Working_Papers/wp006.pf.

and treatment of COVID-19 with ASEAN member states and beyond.

Mr. Balahari rightly points out that ASEAN is in need of multipolarity. Such multipolarity requires engaging and not alienating China, as he appeared to contradictorily suggest in the same remarks. ASEAN should recognize, as a political scientist Andrew Nathan argues, that China “contributes more to the general welfare of the world than it

detracts.”⁸ How to reap from China’s contribution needs to be determined by each sovereign member of ASEAN in the spirit of national and regional interests.

****The Author chooses to use footnote as referencing style.***

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⁸ Nathan, Andrew. 2010. “Review: The Truth About China,” *National Interests*, No. 105 (January/February), p. 77.