Interview - Joseph Chinyong Liow

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Dr Joseph Chinyong Liow is Dean and Professor of Comparative and International Politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He held the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies at the Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., where he was also a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program. Dr Joseph's research interests encompass Muslim politics and social movements in Southeast Asia and the international politics of the Asia Pacific region. He is the author, co-author, or editor of 14 books, including *Ambivalent Engagement: The United States and Regional Security in Southeast Asia after the Cold* War (Brookings 2017), *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) and *Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia*, fourth edition (Routledge, 2014). His commentaries on international affairs have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The National Interest*, *New York Times, Nikkei Asian Review*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he has testified at the United States Congress. Dr Joseph holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science, an MSc in Strategic Studies from the Nanyang Technological University, and a BA (Hons) in Political Science from the University of Madison-Wisconsin.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

It may be a cliché to say that the really interesting stuff happening in the fields of international relations and security studies is happening at the interdisciplinary crossroads, but I do think that is true. For instance, technology, and the role of disruptive technology in particular, has become a major area of exploration in the security studies field of late. Getting IR theorists and computer systems analysts to sit together and have a conversation on cybersecurity is important, but can also be very challenging. As a social scientist working in a technological university, I have witnessed noble efforts at fostering such interdisciplinary research, but have also experienced how difficult it is! I am also very excited about efforts to look beyond Western paradigms in the study of the region, whether in the fields of IR or in area studies, using local texts and cultural histories. It is not easy though, especially for Western scholars, because it requires first, access to these texts through familiarity with the language, and second, an open mind that can look beyond the standard paradigms we are exposed to in North American and European universities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I think the world we live in today is far more unpredictable than what has come before. To be sure, the long cycle of human history has witnessed disruptions before, but probably not on the scope or the speed that we are confronted with today. As a scholar who also has a foot in the policy world, I am increasingly concerned whether we have the analytical frameworks and knowledge to make sense of a lot of these new disruptions. For instance, we have been talking a lot about the nexus between economics and security for some time already. If you look at Asia today, it is widely recognized that it is an economically dynamic region where countries have been registering impressive growth rates over the last 2-3 decades. What has resulted is an economic interdependence that manifests itself, for instance, in the consequential role that the region plays in the global supply chain. But we are also on the cusp of a technological revolution that with robotics, artificial intelligence, and automation could change our paradigms on job security, employment patterns, management, and business cycles, etc. How will this affect interdependence? Moreover, how will this affect the future stability of a region where geoeconomic interdependence presently coexists

with geopolitical tensions? I don't think we quite know what to expect, and I'm not sure if our prevailing assumptions about balance of power, power transitions, the so-called Thucydides Trap, interdependence theory, etc. would be as useful as we hope to help us navigate this future that will soon be upon us.

How do you assess the Trump administration's foreign policy strategy in East Asia? Is the strategy discernibly different from that of previous administrations or is it a continuation of a broad historical norm?

In the first place I'm not even sure it has a "strategy" in East Asia. Certainly not a strategy in the manner we are familiar with! We also have to bear in mind that in this administration, the differences between what the President says (or does) and what other departments, their officials, or indeed, the Cabinet, says (or does) are more stark than we have ever witnessed in recent history. Obviously, this makes foreign policy formulation and implementation challenging; but it also makes it difficult to contextualize and comprehend statements made by the American leadership. Some more hopeful observers argue that shorn of rhetoric, American policy towards East Asia under President Trump has mostly been a tale of continuity. I think this is true up to a point. On the security side of the ledger, much effort has been made by Secretary of Defense Mattis and National Security Adviser McMaster to reassure regional states. On the trade side of the ledger, things didn't start well with the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Asia does hope that good sense will prevail, and the Trump administration will realize that being an active participant, if not leader, in international trade works to the advantage of the average American worker, but thus far, in the aftermath of the TPP withdrawal, there has been very little indication what America's plan B for trade is, aside from the usual expressions of intent to rectify trade imbalances with individual countries.

How do you evaluate the Trump administration's strategy to defuse tensions in the Korean peninsula?

Again, I'm not sure there is a strategy! And if there is one, the corridors of power in Washington DC seem to be concealing it very well! President Trump has already openly undermined his Secretary of State on the matter of how to approach North Korea. Some say this is a strategic move on the part of the administration, something of a good cop, bad cop game. If so, I think it is most unfortunate that it involves publicly undermining and discrediting a member of the Cabinet in a direct fashion. Personality issues aside, I think the sooner the US accepts that denuclearization is no longer realistic, the better the prospects for some progress on managing the issue. Once he gets his intercontinental ballistic missile and develops the capability to mount nuclear warheads on it—and he eventually will—Kim Jong-un is not going to give that up. So the question is now to devise a management regime acceptable to all parties concerned, which would also require some preservation of the deterrence effect which is a priority for Pyongyang.

You recently wrote that "under Trump, the United States lacks a comprehensive [...] strategy through which its interests in the region [Southeast Asia] can be articulated and pursued". How will Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy affect the evolution of the South China Sea issue?

There are a number of perspectives with regards to the South China Sea. One perspective holds that because the South China Sea is not a major interest for the US, it could be used as a bargaining chip for matters of greater concern for the US, such as the Korean Peninsula, especially now that there is a realistic prospect of North Korea posing a threat not just to American allies but to US soil. Another perspective maintains that the US will continue to play a role in the South China Sea as part of larger efforts to stake a presence in the region. So far, it appears that the second view is the more accurate one. But again, the unpredictability of this administration means that one cannot be entirely certain that this will remain the preferred approach in the months and years to come.

As the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) turns 50 this year, what are some of the key challenges that the organisation must confront to stay relevant?

ASEAN has much to be proud of after fifty years of regional diplomacy. Inter-state relations remain peaceful despite occasional bilateral tensions and the presence of unresolved issues. Economic growth has been impressive overall.

ASEAN is a respected multilateral organization in the international community. But if it has come far, it still has some distance to go. Developments in Myanmar with regards to the problems in Rakhine state have tarnished ASEAN's image. The Rohingya refugee crisis is fast becoming the greatest humanitarian crisis of recent times, surpassing even Syria. ASEAN's silence has been deafening. By silence, I don't mean that the organization has not said anything about the issue. An ASEAN statement was released during the UN General Assembly in October. But that statement was also notable for how it was rejected by Malaysia, thereby calling into question yet again the matter of ASEAN unity. Indeed, I think the greatest challenges that the organization faces are those bedeviling it from within. Many analysts are concerned about the centrifugal forces generated by external powers like the US or China. These are important consideration, but they will only have a divisive effect if the organization and its members allow it to.

Considering recent events in Indonesia (i.e. the imposition of strict Islamic laws in several provinces, sentencing Ahok, ex-governor of Jakarta, to two years in jail for blasphemy), do you think Indonesia's tolerant brand of Islam is at risk or is this an exaggerated concern?

I've always taken the view that the situation is far more complicated than the (Western) media tends to portray with problematic notions of "moderate" Islam and "tolerant" Islam. Indonesian Islam has traditionally been very diverse. While the predominant sentiments have been those of openness to and acceptance of other faiths, religions, and cultural practices, more exclusivist views have always been in existence, even if in low-key forms. But if we look at trends and patterns, many would see a conservative turn taking place in Indonesia. The situation is aggravated by the opportunism of political entrepreneurs who play up religious identity in order to enhance their political prospects and pursue their own interests, which often has little to do with faith. While the politicization of the Islamic religion is unfortunate and regrettable, the reality is that there is an audience for whom this is appealing. In other words, political opportunists only play up religious identity in a divisive manner because it has proven to possess some currency with their support base.

The threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia, especially after the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in recent years, has resurfaced. How would you assess the severity of this threat in Southeast Asia?

The threat to Southeast Asia is real. I don't think it is an existential threat, in the sense that I do not believe terrorists will bring an end to either state or society in the region, but the threat to regional security and stability is real, and will be long term. The Philippines will be particularly tested. Its southern islands—Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, Basilan, Tawi-tawi—remain vulnerable. The central state is barely present, while the security forces continue to struggle against a whole array of militant groups. It is also this area of the region that is most vulnerable to penetration by ISIS related groups and sympathisers. Indeed, we have already seen some portents of this with the recent siege of Marawi City. The inability to counter the growth of these militant groups in southern Philippines will pose problems for neighbouring states like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, which have seen extremists and militants among their citizens find sanctuary there.

What is the most important advice you would give to scholars of the Southeast Asia/Asia-Pacific region?

Southeast Asia, I think, remains a fascinating region to study. It has had a long history of being the junction where different cultural, political, and economic forces have met, merged, and at times, clashed. In many ways, the Southeast Asia of today has been a product of these interactions. At the same time, it is a region that is very proud and protective of its autonomy, whether as a geopolitical entity, a common market, or a cultural idea. Because of this, I think it is important that scholars who study the region should strive to do so from the perspective of the region itself rather than from afield, and attempt to derive and use paradigms and frameworks drawn from the region's own cultural and political history. Doing so could well throw up some interesting findings!

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This interview was conducted by Bhargav Sriganesh. Bhargav is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.