

Interview – Ivy Kwek

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Ms. Ivy KWEK is Research Director for Research for Social Advancement (REFSA), a progressive, not-for-profit think tank in Malaysia; and concurrently a Visiting Scholar at the Center of Southeast Asian Studies, National ChengChi University of Taiwan. Prior to this, she was the Special Functions Officer to the Deputy Minister of Defence of Malaysia (2018-2020), and she also has experience working in various policy advisory and governmental affairs roles for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and in the British High Commission in Kuala Lumpur. Ivy holds a Master's degree in International Studies and Diplomacy from SOAS, University of London and was an alumna of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Professional Fellows Program by the US Department of State. She is also a co-founder of Projek Pertiwi, a blog dedicated to raising awareness on defence and security issues among Malaysian youth, and has frequently commented and published on current affairs on various international and local media outlets.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

When I first graduated from university in 2009, I wanted to pursue a career where I can make a long-lasting impact on my community. At that time, I was hitherto living a rather sheltered life, having been raised in a typical working-class Asian family that imparted the mantra of 'study hard, stay out of trouble', and was trying to work my way into medicine through a science degree. But it was an exciting time for youth in Malaysia. I was exhilarated by the social movements happening in the country, especially the protests demanding electoral reform, such as BERSIH. The incumbent government had just experienced a political upset and lost a few state governments, including my home state in Penang. I applied to be an intern at a Member of Parliament office in the constituency where I grew up.

One month later, an aide to an opposition leader was called into the anti-corruption agency to help with the investigation into what was generally perceived as political harassment against his boss. He was found dead in custody a day later. That was a pivotal moment for my career. You would have thought that this would scare a young, inexperienced intern, but it was then that I decided to stay in the field, even though it was a departure from my undergraduate training. So, an internship turned into a full time job, and I never looked back.

My entry point was political activism, but my job has opened up a whole new horizon into the world of social science. It sent me on a quest to understand our society, grappling with issues like history, identity, justice, developmentalism, democracy and governance, equality and human rights. One of the pieces of literature that influenced me the most in my earlier years was Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Community", which has helped me to navigate some of the issues regarding modern nation states and formation of national identities. Edward Said's "Orientalism" along with Syed Alatas "Myth of the Lazy Native" also shaped my views regarding post-colonialism, while William Easterly's "White Man's Burden" got me to question the prevailing *modus operandi* about Western aid diplomacy and global governance. The reading materials that led to my entrance to the IR field were quite standard though, with post-Cold War classics such as Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man", Samuel Huntington's "Clash of

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Civilizations”, Mearshimer’s “Tragedy of Great Power Dynamics” and Robert Kaplan’s “The Revenge of Geography”, but I wouldn’t say that I identified myself as a realist and my thinking has definitely evolved since then.

I chose to enter into International Relations as I think that it is a field that can encapsulate all my interests the best. Power relations fascinates me, but I see the study of the field not as a means, not an end in itself. I believe it is fundamental to understand the behaviors of states, their dynamics with and ways to exert influence and exercise agencies over each other, in order to achieve some greater goals (as cliché as it might sound) – things like peace and stability, development and prosperity, human rights and rule of law, and other existential threats to humanity such as climate change and global health.

As the Research Director for the think tank Research for Social Advancement (REFSA), how do you position your work at the forefront of important policy discussions and debates in Malaysia?

Malaysia’s road to reform has been a long one, since the 1998 Reformasi Movement, to 2007’s Bersih rally which paved the way to the first electoral upset in 2008, and subsequently the first change of government ten years later in 2018. Even then, that did not last long, the government collapsed in a short span of two years and Malaysia is currently at the brink of a constitutional crisis as we speak. This reveals the multi-layered issues we are facing as a country – patronage politics that fueled toxic racial sentiments and the decay of institutions, no thanks to 60 years of unchallenged political power in government.

Even though the political impasse has set us back, REFSA, which was set up in 2004, has been steadfast in advocating for institutional reform and a fairer Malaysia for all through our policy research. With COVID causing a wreck to our economy and society, much of our resources since the beginning of last year have been dedicated towards producing recommendations on COVID-19 management, a safe exit strategy and building back better post-pandemic. Our new security cluster set up last year has also been working on producing analysis of Malaysia’s security outlook, and pressing for security sector reform in Malaysia.

We strive to present our views with evidence-based research. We structured our outreach strategy in three levels of engagement – the 200 (policymakers and influencers), 20000 (informed public and inner policy circles), 200000 (the mass) – and tried to tailor our content accordingly. Apart from our research team, we also have a dedicated creative team who are doing a tremendous job turning our long-form policy recommendations into easily digestible formats, which helps us to reach a wider audience and shape public discourse. We also actively engage ourselves in public debates through media interviews, webinars as well as closed-door meetings with policymakers and thought leaders.

In your previous role as the Special Functions Officer to the Deputy Minister of Defence of Malaysia, you were involved in the drafting of the first Malaysian Defence White Paper published in 2019. Can you tell us more about this and its relevance to current affairs?

The Malaysia Defence White Paper is the first ever public document on defence that has been published in Malaysia. In the past, matters on defence and security were shrouded in secrecy in Malaysia, resulting in little interest nor understanding among the public on national defence. We also unfortunately had some corruption scandals related to defence assets acquisition in the past. As such, the White paper was a major breakthrough not only in terms of increasing transparency and accountability on defence matters, but also as a public engagement effort to foster greater civil-military relations.

One of the key themes of the White Paper is its vision of Malaysia as a “Maritime Nation with Continental Roots”. Even though Malaysia is surrounded by three bodies of waters (i.e. the South China Sea, The Sulu Sea and the Malacca Straits), the maritime domain has not been given the emphasis it deserves (Malaysian military is army-centric, for historical reasons due to the jungle warfare waged during the Communist Insurgency from the late 1960s through the 1980s). Not only are we a maritime nation, we are also connected to mainland Southeast Asia and Eurasia by land. The White Paper purports that Malaysia should maximise its potential as a bridging linchpin between the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. Such characterisation would have a far-reaching impact on how

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we perceive our geographical reality and security outlook, and in turn inform our policymaking in allocating resources, including the restructuring of our forces. Increasing the jointness and the capability to operate in two theatres were also emphasised given Malaysia's separate landmasses.

The Defence White Paper identifies Malaysia's security challenges in three broad categories: uncertainty of great power relations, complex Southeast Asian neighbours and non-traditional security threats. It also articulated the series of reforms including the modernisation of the future force, people in defence, rejuvenation of the defence industry and defence engagement which corresponds to its three pillars of defence strategy (i.e. Concentric Deterrence, Comprehensive Defence and Credible Partnership). Perhaps most importantly, the implementation chapter outlined a series of follow up actions to be taken, including setting up a cross-ministerial governance structure to deliberate the budget for the Joint Capability Development Plan to be produced by the military.

You previously wrote about how Malaysia should give more importance to its relations with the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) to promote greater ASEAN integration in a post-COVID-19 context. Why is this so? How can Malaysia's foreign policy engage better with the GMS?

The GMS has not been featured prominently in ASEAN's agenda, less so Malaysia's foreign policy priorities. In the paper I argued that maritime Southeast Asia should give more emphasis towards the GMS. In a way, the similarity between the Great Mekong Sub-region and the South China Sea is uncanny in the sense that in both situations, small states in Southeast Asia are facing a giant neighbour and running the risks of being caught in between great power competition. Most GMS countries joined ASEAN much later, and there has always been a sense that the issues concerning mainland Southeast Asia have not been given as much importance compared to its maritime counterparts. Greater ASEAN involvement in the GMS is also needed in order to exert ASEAN centrality in the highly competitive space in the region, and strengthen integration between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia.

I also argued that Malaysia can and should give more emphasis to the GMS, as with in the past when Malaysia played an active role in setting up the ASEAN-Mekong Basin Cooperation mechanism in 1996, which aimed to enhance social and economic cooperation in the region with the Singapore-Kunming Rail Link as its flagship project (interests fizzled out after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1998). This is where Malaysia can take advantage of its "continental root" as mentioned in the previous section.

The South China Sea issue holds both converging and diverging interests from involved parties in Southeast Asia. In what ways can the Quad contribute to regional security and what steps should it take to present itself as a trusted partner of ASEAN?

The South China Sea is a hotly contested area and the foremost security concern in the region, firstly because of overlapping territorial disputes and secondly due to the overbearing influence of great power relations. Its stability is not only of interest to claimant states, and Southeast Asia has always included other regional powers in the regional security architecture. Having said that, ASEAN countries still have their reservations about the Quad and the Indo-Pacific given the context of which it was conceptualised, which is mainly seen as a containment strategy towards China. ASEAN is concerned that the Quad will adopt a confrontational approach towards China, and risk destabilising the region – the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific was indeed an attempt to give a more inclusive vision of the region. ASEAN would also want to maintain ASEAN centrality in the region, and the Quad will need to establish a complementary relation with ASEAN. The new Biden administration has taken steps to tone down the rhetoric, as can be seen by the last Quad Summit which focuses more on pragmatic cooperation, including the pledge of delivering one billion doses of vaccines to the region. I think this is a welcoming development, articulating a new non-confrontational dynamic with China will certainly assuage Southeast Asia's concerns of becoming a theatre of conflict and being forced to choose a side. Rather than "warning" against the economic dominance of China, the Quad ought to invest more in the region and seek concrete partnerships in common challenges such as climate change, Post-COVID recovery, technology and supply chain resilience, which can help build the region and provide more options for Southeast Asian countries.

What are you currently working on?

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I am currently on a visiting fellowship in the National ChengChi University in Taipei, Taiwan, where I am researching the implementation of the New Southbound Policy and its impact in Southeast Asia. I'm grateful for the opportunity to travel at a time of COVID-19 and this immersive experience to learn about the Taiwanese perspective with regards to stability in the region, it being the potential flashpoint of conflict between US and China, and its effort to reduce its reliance on China with the increasing cross-strait tensions since 2016.

I am also working with my colleagues in Malaysia on a series of papers on security sector reform for Malaysia post-COVID-19. At the same time, I am also managing a defence blog Projek Pertiwi that aims at raising awareness and creating constructive discourse on issues relating to Malaysia's national defence and security among Malaysian public, particularly the youth.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Treat your scholastic pursuit as a public service. As scholars, our responsibility is to understand the world better, and help others to make sense of the facts and information around us. This is increasingly important in our post-truth world today, where on one hand, we are bombarded by polarising views, misinformation and fake news, and on the other, often end up in an echo chamber of our own belief system. A modern-day academic also needs to be a public intellectual that possesses the ability to capture the attention and imagination of the public discourse in a saturated and competitive "marketplace of ideas", but also somehow manage to preserve our integrity and uphold our ethical standards amidst the drowning noise of rhetoric and emotions, political pressure, and many so-called expert opinions that perpetuate certain biases.

Finally, a note on self-care: the journey of academic research can sometimes be a lonely and frustrating journey, so patience and perseverance is key. Finding your support mechanism to deal with stress, self-doubts and other negative emotions that might get in your way is also absolutely essential.