

Globalism DEFEATED! Multipolarity Wins Against Colonial West | Dr Kee Beng Ooi

It's the "last hurra of colonialism", as my guest today, Dr. Ooi Kee Beng, puts it. The wars in Ukraine and Iran are left-overs of a time that has already passed and is currently being supplanted by the realities of the Multipolar Order. Dr. Ooi, executive director of Penang Institute, discusses why Southeast Asia feels more hopeful than Europe, how China's rise shapes decolonization and multipolarity, and why Western thinking still treats the world as a contest. He examines colonial history, the Middle East, ASEAN neutrality, and keeping the Strait of Malacca open. The Penang Peace Dialogue SIGN UP: <https://commonwealthofworldchinatowns.com/penang-peace-dialogue> Links: Wikibeng: <https://wikibeng.com> Penang Institute: <https://penanginstitute.org> ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:01:09 Europe and Southeast Asia's outlook 00:06:13 China's rise and regional history 00:11:44 Decolonization and a multipolar world 00:23:21 Bandung, Africa, and sovereignty 00:26:39 Orientalism and the colonial world order 00:39:28 Iran, the Middle East, and oil 00:42:56 ASEAN and the Strait of Malacca 00:49:03 Maritime Southeast Asia and globalization

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, for the first time, with Dr. Ooi Kee Beng, the director of the Penang Institute and one of Malaysia's most well-known and influential policy and foreign policy thinkers. Dr. Ooi, welcome.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Thank you. Thank you, Pascal.

#Pascal

It's lovely having you. And just before we start, I want to tell everybody that there will be a big event in Penang, actually: the Penang Peace Dialogue on September 5th and 6th, so in less than a month. So a lot of thinkers will actually gather on your beautiful island and talk about the international situation. For anyone who would like to go there, Neutrality Studies still has eight open seats. You can write me an email and say that you would like to participate. I'd be happy to put you in touch. And Dr. Ooi, you will also be part of this group, and then there will be a lot of international relations talk there and analysis on, well, peace in the world. Dr. Ooi, with this out of the way, can

we talk a little bit about your perspective on where we are in 2026 when it comes to war and peace? Because, you know, in Europe, it looks very, very bleak at the moment. What is your analysis of where we stand?

#Kee Beng Ooi

Well, that's correct, what you say. I think Europe is in a state of crisis, partly self-made, partly thinking too much sometimes. While in this part of the world, you don't feel that much. You feel it through reading the mass media and how the Trump presidency reacts to all sorts of things, rather aggressively and provocatively and so on. So from here, we do get that sense that, are people preparing for war, or what is this? Well, in Asia as a whole, East Asia at least, things are calm. So if we don't talk about imminent war in Taiwan every day, it's quite a beautiful part of the world. And not only that, in many ways, it's thriving. Economically, it's not doing too badly, even with the American tariffs and other conflicts, including the Ukraine war and Iran. So generally, people are happy and optimistic day to day. Yeah, sorry.

#Pascal

It's a very different picture. I mean, I got the same feeling every time I visit Southeast Asia, be it Thailand or Indonesia, that people seem quite looking forward to the future, right? It's like there's good things in store. And when they come to Europe, everything is gloomy. Everything is like, oh, it's about war. There will be war. We must prepare for war. Even in Switzerland, it's very dystopian in a sense.

#Kee Beng Ooi

From our side, of course, we think that it's the discourses and partly the global propaganda has—well, I'll call it the global propaganda machinery—has gone into a very pessimistic mode, I think, for quite a few years now. And so it has a very bad effect, I would say, on Western soft power. I mean, Western soft power has always been very strong in this part of the world. Southeast Asia has always largely been rather, well, pro-West. They like Western things and so on. But all that has disappeared very quickly, I suspect personally, due to things looking like propaganda. And it's as if the reality in Europe has suddenly become very different from the reality here. And I think when we were younger here, let's say 30 years ago, we were more ready to think that our situation is quite like what it is in Europe.

We saw each other as more part of a global geoeconomic whole. I think that that time has passed, partly thanks to the rise of China, the rise of India, and so on. The economic reality, I think, is what pushes things. The ideology follows. And so generally, people are rather optimistic here, I think, despite certain natural disasters, as you might have read about here. But it's also a part of the world that's always been rather embracing of differences. It's a very maritime area. Some call it the second Mediterranean, I suppose. So we've always had some level of—some high level of multiculturalism in

this part of the world. So there's a certain, well, if you like to put a bad spin on it, fatalism; a positive spin is also a good thing, if you know what I mean.

It's like not to depend too much on the world too quickly. And of course, I tend to think a lot stems from economics. So when the economic situation is rather good in the region, not only country by country, you tend to feel more optimistic. Social mobility seems very real. It seems real that my children will have a better life than me. There's generally peace. We don't see any chance of a great war breaking out here. Now, that maybe brings me to an important point. We fear that if there is a war here, it will be caused by some Western power. It won't be caused by us. I think that would be a general feel of things. And of course, nobody likes someone—you know, you can't be too positive about people or forces or nations that you think might try to ignite conflict in this part of the world.

#Pascal

You know, if you listen to especially mainstream Western geopolitical analysis, you will very quickly get the idea that China is about to launch a war against Taiwan, against the Philippines. Is this any of your concern, or is this part of what you previously referred to as the propaganda machinery?

#Kee Beng Ooi

Now, first, I would say, we say "rise of China." So I think in the West, when they say "rise of China," it's as if China wasn't here before the rise.

#Pascal

Yeah, right.

#Kee Beng Ooi

It dropped down from Mars or something. But we've always lived with China. I'm of Chinese origin. Penang is 45% Chinese. So, not to put too much on the Chinese thing, but this part of the world is where China's influence has always been rather great. Maybe if you go back a thousand, two thousand years, Indian influence was rather strong because many of the cultures here, the Malay cultures as defined in Indonesia and Malaysia, are clearly Indic in character. And then there is a Mohammedan, if I use that word, layer on top of that, coming largely from Arabia and India itself. But if we now look at the last few hundred years, you see that the Chinese influence is stronger, mainly through demographics, mainly through movement from South China, immigrants from South China, and also economic influences from China.

So since we're talking about that, I would like, before I forget, to say that when we say rise of China, there's of course a rise and a fall. And in Chinese history, you do have that cyclic movement. Dynasties come, dynasties go. And of course, Chinese dynasties tend to be Northern China, really.

They usually start in Northern China. So Southern China has always had its own history. But every time there's a rise or fall, there will be effects, ripple effects, if you want to call it that, coming into Southeast Asia, especially the northern countries. And of course, as you know, Vietnam used to be under the Chinese for a thousand years.

But once they freed themselves, it became very obvious to Vietnamese identity to be, "We are not Chinese," right? That kind of feeling. So that, of course, to think of Vietnam without China is also difficult because that's the big neighbor up north. But then even further down, there have been movements by sea of people going north and south. But, well, many from coastal China would have come down and influenced this part of the world. As we know, if you take Thailand itself, the Thai people today, a large portion of them are of Chinese origin, especially in Bangkok and so on. So all those—well, my long way of saying that when you say rise of China, it's just a continuing story.

#Pascal

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#Kee Beng Ooi

See you there. It's like talking about Europe as if France doesn't belong. You know, rise of France. What does that mean? So I would now, of course, when I put it this way, I would, of course, also like to note that this rise of China, this one is different in that it's now totally inspired by Western technologies, Western scientific mindsets, and so on, right? And all that is important, of course, because that was what saw the fall of China, saw the fall of the Qing Empire. They couldn't, despite being at that time the strongest economy in the world, they couldn't really, in the end, resist the largely military technology that the West had. At the end of the 1800s, 1900s especially, well, the British century, of course, came with such might in military, commercial, ideological areas that the ancient Chinese system, in the end, couldn't resist it. And so it fell.

So this rise is then a Hegelian step, if I use that word, of East having an antithesis that is the West, and now you have something that is, we don't know what, Westernism with Chinese characteristics? Something like that, right? So we have all this mix of East Chinese communists—well, communist is also Western. And yes, in many ways, you have a communist party running the place, but it's running the place as if it were a dynastic house almost. You know what I mean? I'm trying to bring in the Hegelian idea that there is a historical movement, yeah, going one way and then the other. So you can't just see China as if it's ancient China. It's not ancient China. Ancient China was destroyed in many ways, and this is a new construction. So in that sense, it is not just another rise of China. This rise of China is going to have larger impacts on the whole region.

#Pascal

Yeah, and we see that. So, you know, one of my problems that I often speak about is, of course, that the West has this intense need to conceptualize the entire world of international politics as an us versus them. Again, like, there's good, there's evil, and then there's nothing in between. And I think especially Malaysia, Indonesia, Southeast Asia has now a long history since independence, since the fifties, actually, to say like, no, guys, no. I mean, Bandung was about saying this is not what it should be anymore. And there, in '55, your prime minister at the moment has been quite outspoken of saying like, no, look, we don't pick sides, and we have a different approach at things. What do you think about this? And do you have the impression that the Western colleagues are listening to the perspective that's coming from Malaysia, Indonesia, and other places that are not the West?

#Kee Beng Ooi

The West has always been interesting in that you always have a range of values and understandings of things. At the moment, though, it seems the—I would use the word Orientalism, right, perhaps—the Orientalist view is very strong. Orientalist in the sense that if it's not West, it's bad. And I think in this part of the world, we're already thinking about a future that is necessarily multipolar in some sense, right? And so my take on that today is that multipolarity, to the extent it's already here, won't be very peaceful unless the West is not unipolar.

If there's only one West, then there won't be any multipolarity because the West won't allow it. But if the West discovers that it is not one, it is many parts, and it can agree within itself that other civilizations are not, by definition, inferior, then we have a chance. But as long as the West wants to go that way where anything non-Western is inferior, and if there's anything good outside of the West, it's copied from the West, which is a ridiculous idea. But I think that seems to be part of the discourse, right? So I think going forward, our biggest challenge is to re-educate the West.

#Pascal

Can I just ask you, this portrayal that you just gave, is this something that became clear to you over the last couple of years, or has it been clear for the last 20, 30 years? And how would we do that? Because I agree with you, we need to re-educate the West. But the West is very, very education-resistant.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Yeah. So it's like when you go to school, first year in school, you have to make sure the kids sit down and learn that there is something to be learned. There's a point to sitting in the classroom or having a round table, as it were. There's a strong sense of superiority, which might have had very good reasons for having a while ago when we're thinking in terms of military and scientific innovations and so on. But in terms of civilization, civilizational effect and so on, the rest of the

world, I mean, they had their own. It's time for the West to leave the colonial mindset behind. By that, I of course mean that you're not out to discover the world. You're not out to save the world. You know, all that. And you mentioned the Bandung Conference.

I think the Bandung Conference was the first attempt by the non-Western countries to say, hey, we are in this together. We have similar problems, and the problem is Western capitalism, if I want to use that word, and that colonialism isn't over just because of the Second World War; it takes other forms. And so we, the Bandung Conference members—today we say Global South, of course—we have to stand up, and we have to, you know, regain whatever integrity we lost. And I think to convince the West that they need re-educating will come from economic need, I think. Not so much ideology. Economic need first, and then the ideology will follow, I think. You know, that's one of my convictions: that economics goes first, and then the mind follows. A bit Nazi, I would admit.

#Pascal

No, it's good. It's a very good point. You know, once you go to a place and you see tall buildings, beautiful things, et cetera, you start wondering how to do that yourself as well. And the West at the moment is not a champion in building new things. On the contrary, the current austerity movement is actually leading actively to social deterioration. Okay, but where do you think that Southeast Asia—how Southeast Asia at the moment, and Southeast Asia is maybe too big a geography, but let's say the two big ones, Malaysia and Indonesia—how they look at the warfare that's going on? What is your analysis of what led to the Iran war, for instance, and what's the analysis of what led to the Ukraine war?

#Kee Beng Ooi

Can I leave that question aside and finish something you stimulated in my head? Sure. I'll come to this question. You asked, when I mentioned Orientalism and Western superiority and all that, if there's something new that's coming. I would answer yes and no, in that I think it's more widespread now among Asians that there are still things to be gained from their decolonizing process. And I think the rise of China has been, in that sense, epiphanic for many, many people here, in that they're now beginning to think beyond just being a defensive nation-state that can survive in a West-dominated world. And I think for quite a few decades, independence was basically that.

You create a defensive nation-state, and then you try to live off the world system in some sense. You start free trade zones and get Intel to build a factory, and then you're happy. Well, I'm part of the world economy now. And so the ambitions of decolonization were rather low, today when we look at it. And thanks to the rise of countries like China and so on, we suddenly think, hey, we can go further than that. We can be the equal of the West as humans. We've been relating to each other since colonialism through being states, through being nations. I think we can go beyond that. We can relate to each other as peoples.

So now to go further back to that, I think if we go not too far back in Western thinking, before the Cold War ended, you had the left and right side, and that allowed for all sorts of thinking to be possible, even in the West, right? And Orientalism, of course, was something that, even if it's Edward Said who popularized it, came out of Western leftist thinking. And so there was that space. But with the fall of the Berlin Wall and with the coming of neoliberalism, the West sort of narrowed its framework for thinking. So a lot of what we would call leftist ideas now have disappeared. And those were very inspiring ideas. And I think a lot of it still does exist in Asia. So that's maybe more my answer to your earlier question.

It's been there all the time, but it's getting new life now. So Bandung Conference becomes the global South. Those leftist tendencies are still around, and neoliberalism is in retreat, and therefore leftist thoughts are returning in some form or other. I don't think communism will return in that Leninist sense, but communist ideals, if I dare to say that today, are still around because many of them are quite intuitively acceptable ideas of equality and things like that, right? So capitalism during the neoliberal period became invisible in that it became the given. And I think we're reaching a point where we have to become slightly Marxist again and problematize capitalism, especially when you're talking about one percent now. I don't think Marx even thought about that.

#Pascal

Yeah, we have the first dollar trillionaire in the United States.

#Kee Beng Ooi

It's getting, like, more and more crass, to the point where we see this economic discrepancy.

#Pascal

And we see at the same time how China lifted 800 million people out of poverty and into the middle class. I mean, the contrast is getting higher and higher.

#Kee Beng Ooi

It's actually—and we don't react to it with disgust. It's really indecent for 1% to be owning, I don't know how many, 50% of the world's wealth and so on. And that is the basis for great instability in the world, I think, in the global economy. You cannot imagine that kind of difference in some country, right? Some countries do have that, I suppose. But it's not stable. People will not live with that. But there is no global solution to that at the moment.

#Pascal

There's no global dialogue about it anymore, as there was during the Cold War with the capitalist-versus-communist kind of debate. There's not. It's like, as you said, it's now the given that this is just how the world is. And you're saying that that's probably something that will change.

#Kee Beng Ooi

That will change, but it might take the form of the Global North, Global South. And I hope it doesn't polarize the way it did during the Cold War. And that's why I would push the concept of multipolarity, even to the extent to say that we have always been multipolar. And it's globalization shrinking the world that made unipolarity and bipolarity possible. And we have reached a point where all parts of the world demand to be heard. And so the idea that everyone should have a space is the basis for multipolarity. But if we think that China is here to replace the US, then we're going down the same rabbit hole again.

#Pascal

Yeah, but that's, of course, also one of these Western attitudes, to always think the other one is just like us, right? So because we had to dominate the world, therefore China must be like that and will try to dominate the world. Actually, that's the realist paradigm. It's like, it's either us or them, and everybody acts basically like the West. I don't want to make a lot of, like, criticism on them, but you can be free to react to that. But I have one more thing about Bandung and the changes since then, because Bandung was very explicitly an Afro-Asian conference, right? Afro-Asian, and that was a big term in the Cold War. Is that still around, or is Africa and Asia kind of drifting into separate realms in your perception? But feel free to answer to whatever you would like to.

#Kee Beng Ooi

I think it's still around, partly as a legacy of Bandung or the Cold War even. Now, I lived in China quite a few years ago to study Mandarin, and some of my classmates were Africans. So they were studying Mandarin. This is in the 1980s. We've forgotten that during the Cold War, there were many African socialist or communist countries that had strong ties to China. So that legacy is quite continuous. So again, in Western media, when they suddenly say as if China suddenly appeared in Africa—no, during, you know, the Cold War, that bloc, if I call it that, of anti-capitalist countries did exist.

And they did not all disappear when the wall fell. Just because it disappeared in Europe, it didn't just melt away everywhere else. This sentiment that we need—we need to build ourselves up, we need to fight the power, if you like—has been there at some level, right? And so even since Bandung, you can have military types of leaders or more authoritarian. What always drove them was this sense

that we need to be equal, we need to build ourselves up. Every country wants to have its own dignity, its own sovereignty, and so on. It's a basic human right, right? You cannot take integrity of peoples away from them.

#Pascal

Now, should I try to answer your question about Ukraine? Yes, sorry, I didn't want to interrupt your chain of thought, because it's very interesting how you're presenting this development. Let's go to the war question, but sorry, maybe before that: what you're presenting here, is this what's evident to you, or do you think this is what's evident to a lot of people in Southeast Asia? Because, you know, this is not at all evident to people in the West, in North America and Europe. I mean, it's quite amazing how there's a large, large group of think tankers and universities and so on who all portray the current moment as one between good and evil. You know, Russia and the West, and the evil mullah regime and the West, and good Israel and the evil terrorists. It's really, it's striking, especially once you break out of that mental framework.

#Kee Beng Ooi

I use the term Orientalism quite pointedly in that, if I think only of China first, I'm a sinologist, right? I study Chinese history and Chinese philosophy at Stockholm University, which has always been a great place to study sinology. And it was a given for all our students there at that time that the Western relationship to China, which was a very convenient other, had always been rather difficult, in that you would have Sinophilic periods and then you would have periods when China is the source of all evil. So China has always been... You would always have Europeans who adore China, and then you would have Europeans who would hate China, for they prescribe all evil onto China, and so on and so forth.

This present period we're in, of course, has new elements in it because China is finally the strongest economic power again and so on. But what I can see, a lot of people who do talk bad things about China, negative things about China, haven't even been to China. So it's some kind of image they have. So actually, that's not new because that's how it's always been for a lot of Westerners, Europeans and so on, that China is just an image. And of course, an image is like any neighbor you hate. You don't want to meet him, and so you're able to continue hating him because you don't see him as a person.

But then if he suddenly gets cancer and his wife runs away, then suddenly you pity him, and then suddenly he's a person. And then you go visit him and have a cup of tea with him or something. That is really important. And I think it is to the advantage of certain powers that be to keep that distance, that discursive distance between groups, right? The othering is important, right? Now, what's also interesting is, and maybe with that we could go into the present wars, is the role of the Muslim states now, the Arabian, Central, you know, Middle East. Seen in... If I look at historical patterns, we do. Now, this is from my doctoral thesis, so I hope you have patience with that.

In that, I tried to look at Europe as distinct pieces, right? So there is the Atlantic coast, meaning the Dutch and maybe the Danish and England and so on. That stood for a lot of very powerful colonialism and maybe capitalism, piracy, and so on. And if you include Spain and Portugal, definitely. So they were able to extract a lot of wealth and power through conquest. America being founded was, of course, the big advantage, but then all the rest of the world. But then Central Europe itself, the countries that didn't have much of a coastline, because they were, of course, threatened. So you have the Germans coming to bring the Russians and so on.

So there were waves, I call them waves, of reaction to modernity, if I use that, and modernity in that sense was very much North Atlantic. But North Atlantic is not Europe. So you can have NATO, but it's not Europe. Europe is Germany, Europe is a lot of other countries. So throughout recent history, the last 200 years or so, these other countries had to react as well to the rising power of England and the Dutch and so on. So you have something like the fascist wave, I would call it, because they had to very quickly build themselves into modern countries in order to be able to resist the Atlantic countries, and also to partake in the colonizing of the world. So Europe as one country, that's also a myth, in a sense.

They went with different trajectories. Then you have Russia, which, if not fascist, became really Leninist, Stalinist, communist. It was like, almost at the same time, another wave of countries trying to take part in the modern plundering of the world, let's say. So the modern history of the world sort of happens in waves, reacting to this new way of accumulating wealth, either through plundering or through productivity, through capitalism, through science and technology, and so on. So those who were being left behind, of course, had to very quickly react. So throughout Europe, same thing. So you see that. Where did Germany come into being? 1868 or something?

People have forgotten that there was no Germany until the 1860s. There was no Italy until the 1860s as well. And at the same time, you have Japan becoming modern in the 1860s too. So there was a reaction to this very, very strong North Atlantic power that was taking over the world. You had to stop them or take part. And China, if we move to China, China was the victim, a major victim of all of this, right? So the Opium War and so on, the plundering of China, what the Chinese now call the hundred years of humiliation and so on. So if one is more historically inclined, that's what the modern world looks like. This was the flow. This was the flow of power. This is the dark side of globalization.

The generation of today would think globalization is somehow just economics, technology, and so on. No, it was on the back of piracy, genocide, and so on. Now, not to blame anybody. As a historian, that's how humans act, right? But now we have globalization. We are now a world. Everybody knows the world now. So we are caught. We are still caught in the format of the colonial era of getting to know each other, which wasn't a very nice way of getting to know each other. So I

think the Bandung Conference then, in that sense, is we, as different nations, come together as equals. And so, you know, for peace or common development, that idea. And the West has to agree to that. The West has to come along and join that family of man.

#Pascal

I applaud everything that you just said. It's just, unfortunately, the resistance of the West to actually accept such a framework in order to look at things is quite high. And, you know, it matters. It really does. If the framework is, "The West brought civilization to the world, but some parts of the world are still just not up to our speed yet," then you're also quite prone to looking at what's happening in Israel as another instance where, you know, a defenseless people must defend themselves against the hordes, against the barbarians, right? Against the terrorists, and poor, like the only democracy in the Middle East, right?

Has to defend itself because that's basically what the colonial West did with North America: genocide the entire place and repopulate them with white people and black people that they took in as slaves. But that kind of mindset is not there, even though there's an appreciation for that kind of history today. But it doesn't really translate into a perceptual framework. Whereas I think what you laid out to us would be quite evident to large parts of peoples who were under this colonial yoke and actually have that kind of experience on the other side and survived, I must say.

#Kee Beng Ooi

And what also fascinates me is that, of course, we have terrorism, the terrorists, and so on, but that the rest of the world have been able to accept the West so well, despite all the atrocities and so on. So I don't know. So, well, the good thing is we have Trump. Trump somehow pushes—he makes things obvious, right? It's more clear. Yes, yes, yes, because he has no sophistication. And so he doesn't—I mean, he lies all the time, but he doesn't—he has no sophisticated lies. It's like, if you look at his administration recently, the last few weeks, they're starting to talk about how people owe them. Europe owes America. Everybody owes America now. It's payback time somehow, right?

It comes up that everything's a threat from China, which, come on. Anyway, if I mention as an aside, when we talk about the Thucydides Trap, right? It's a hard word for me to pronounce, Thucydides. In the media, it's as if the problem comes from number two. The number two catching up is the one that will cause the trouble. But then, I mean, if you look into that kind of dynamic anywhere, the number one is the problem, right? The number one is the one that has to accept the new situation. The number one is the one that's going to resist the number two. That alone tells me something about this global propaganda. The one catching up is to blame. Yeah.

#Pascal

May I ask you just on this point, because it was so fascinating to me to hear Xi Jinping, in the visit when Trump went to China, Xi Jinping actually alluding to that, to this trap, because it's such a Western concept. But Xi Jinping took the pains of actually, all his scriptwriters, in how do we somehow package what we want to say into something that they can maybe understand. Is that also how you took this?

#Kee Beng Ooi

Yeah, I was surprised too, because I thought China, as a rule, wouldn't accept that way of thinking, like the way they wouldn't accept G2, right? I mean, it's a simple thing. I wish young people would become more conscious of how power works. A simple, innocuous term packs a lot of power in it. So if China had accepted G2, that means what happens to BRICS? There's no BRICS anymore. But the Chinese are clever enough to see that. So if I study Chinese diplomacy, I would think that they are rather conscious in language use. Maybe it comes from being ancient or something. You know how much power is hidden in every word you pick.

But in this case, when this trap was mentioned by Xi Jinping, I was thinking that he's the host. So usually, the host tries to talk like the guest. And I was wondering, is that because then otherwise he won't understand you? So you have to talk the way you know he talks. So was it that kind of context? Because as a principle, they don't accept that kind of thinking. But since Trump does, so if you want to talk to him, talk to him on his own terms in some sense, right? But I don't know if that's a good enough explanation, but I was surprised that he did use that term. It could be like he's playing host, and so you talk like your guest to some extent. Otherwise, the message goes.

#Pascal

Yeah, I took it also as such. It's just surprising because I would have thought that he would try to use a Chinese concept in order to basically, you know, talk about something how they would want to see it. But it seems to me, at least for now, that China accepted that, okay, you know, we need Mearsheimer, et cetera. We need these frameworks in order to then understand how we need to package our view in a way that's accessible to them. You know, it's so funny how in Hollywood movies, always the idea is that if aliens come to Earth, it's us who figure out how they speak, and then we learn to communicate, which is obviously not. The West cannot even speak to China and figure out how China speaks. I find that so funny.

#Kee Beng Ooi

But I suppose, well, you're talking to Trump, so are you going to talk Chinese philosophy today? I don't know. But what I was saying about what's interesting now is the claiming of global space, if I put it that way, of the Arabic countries—or I won't say Arabic countries—the Middle East, Iran not being Arabic, right? So it's about time. In a way, that bit I didn't get to with my PhD thesis is that

after China coming out, and I would call it the Confucian wave because it was together with the flying geese and so on. But a missing actor in that game, in that picture, was the Middle East.

#Pascal

What's happened? Where do they come in?

#Kee Beng Ooi

How is their modernizing? But then, of course, with Iran, suddenly everybody is now interested in how did the modern Middle East become what it became, right? And, of course, Israel is right in the middle of that, right? It has, I suppose, a lot to do with the Ottoman, how the Ottoman was actually built up. It wasn't the same type of empire as China was an empire. And the British and the French were interested in the oil, and they cut the whole place up and so on. So it was extremely difficult for the Arabic nations to make a modernistic impact on the modern world.

I suppose at one time during the Cold War, many of their governments called themselves, well, socialists in some sense, right? Military, of course, socialists and so on. But all that has gone away, and there's no ideology that offers some chance of uniting them and so on. But in the end, it boils down to oil. And it's not the Arabic countries that are rising. It's Iran that stands its ground, as it were. And then suddenly we start thinking, hey, Iran, yeah, that's as old as China, isn't it? It's not old. So we start talking civilization now, right? And how the roots go. I mean, there is a lot to that.

But I think one shouldn't push the point too far about ancient Chinese and myself, that we are the same people. I mean, there are friends that are... No, I won't push that point too much. We'll need another hour to discuss those issues. But now suddenly the Middle East has to have its place in the world. And that's the place where a lot of our oil comes from. And so they're sort of claiming that space, but in a rather military fashion. Of course, it's all built around war because colonialism hasn't ended. The impact of colonialism, of course, lives on. And so you have people like Trump who go to Venezuela and say, "Okay, I'm king now. I want your oil." Okay.

#Pascal

Take your oil. It's mine now, period.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Are we back in the Spanish period? It looks like it, right? Oh, there's oil. I want it. I'll take it. And so Trump is good in that he gives us an insight, the present generation, into what it probably felt like 500 years ago.

#Pascal

But isn't it very near you? Because at the beginning you said we don't see any indications that there would be a big war soon. But what we're seeing with the Strait of Hormuz is actually very, very crucial to a place that you are very, very close to, the Strait of Malacca. I mean, I don't know, is Penang already officially part of the Strait? Yeah. We're at the end, right? But the Strait of Malacca is pivotal, right? If the United States wants to fight a war with China, it will need to cut that thing off, right? How do you assess that risk?

#Kee Beng Ooi

Well, from here, we'll say, hey, none of you, stay away. This is a stretch of water. People can use it. To politicize it and to weaponize it, that is war talk, of course. And I think the final hurrah of colonialism, it won't happen here. I don't think ASEAN and the countries here will allow that to happen, that the Straits of Malacca will remain open. It's for the world to use. So it's warmongering to many ears here, I think. And we don't want to be part of that. And so the Iran war is interesting if we compare it to Iraq or Afghanistan. Iran, I would say, stood its ground. You are not going to take this place, right? While Iraq was taken, Afghanistan was taken. But of course, that maybe ties in with that America didn't invade Venezuela. They just took the head out, because that's about the extent of what they can do using technological warfare. It's not infantry anymore.

#Pascal

I had this discussion with Indonesian colleagues about this, ASEAN centrality and also ZOPFAN, the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, and that actually now we're going to get into an age where it's even more important that ASEAN somehow defends that principle. And there might come a moment when it has to militarily defend the principle that no single power shall impose its will over here, and mainly toward the Americans, as in, you cannot come in with your aircraft carriers and close the Strait of Malacca. We will not accept that. Do you think this is something that is being discussed at the moment within Malaysia, Indonesia, or is it too theoretical still?

#Kee Beng Ooi

That's actually a very good question, because it gets at the heart of the ASEAN problem, in that ASEAN's agency and ability to have an impact on the world has always been rather dependent on the big powers allowing it, because there's no great power here that can keep all the major powers out. So we found that niche. I think the Southeast Asians found that niche partly thanks to the Cold War, I suppose, of making full use of being a sort of buffer zone. We make full use of being a buffer. So our convening power is one of our greatest benefits given to the world, that we can get people together. And on the sidelines, the Americans and Chinese can talk, and so on and so forth, right?

So ASEAN being in the driver's seat, centrality sort of depends on people wanting to get into your car, right? Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's the old idea. They don't need to sit in your car. They want to sit in your car because you offer them a possibility they otherwise cannot have. But when push comes

to shove, when Trump wants to push things, then suddenly ASEAN centrality disappears. ASEAN is in a sort of crisis in, what should we do with ourselves now? And what if... what if the Americans want to play hardball? What is our role? So I think ASEAN might be in that kind of position. It will have a future, but I think at the moment it has to wait for the right time and the right measure to act.

#Pascal

I perceive ASEAN, Southeast Asia, quite as, you know, for its geographic location and its political development, in kind of a forced position of neutrality, quote unquote. And neutrals, they never have the big stick and the big carrots, but they tend to have small sticks and small carrots that they can play with. But when the other one plays hardball, they take out the big stick, right? And this is then the place where, you know, successful neutrals always need to advertise, "Oh, by the way, it's better you leave us in peace. We can serve you better in that way than really antagonizing us." But that can go wrong in many, many ways, from the Baltics to Belgium and so on.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Yeah.

#Pascal

It's now that we need our statecraft.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Well, I don't know. ASEAN, I tend to think now, when ASEAN a few years ago was flying high and being in the driver's seat and so on, I did think that, and I still do, that RCEP, when ASEAN plus five—it was six, but then India pulled out—I think that might stay in history as a high point in what ASEAN could accomplish, in a way. You had an East Asia that could trade and talk to each other, and now, if RCEP develops well, then we have a good reason not to go to war over anything. But I know that's rather idealistic. But I think that's one of ASEAN's chief achievements, I think.

#Pascal

Let's see what goes. I agree. I agree. One of ASEAN's great achievements is actually to provide a possible framework for others to say, like, hey, how about we organize ourselves like this? It's not as integrated as the EU. It's not as hegemonic as the US, but it works. They trade with each other. It's actually quite multipolar in itself. So I'm rather optimistic about ASEAN, actually.

#Kee Beng Ooi

It's some kind of maritime culture we have here, maritime civilization that is quite different from territory-based civilization. And the ASEAN way and all that, we have to historically look at this part of the world. Now, some Southeast Asianists might not agree with me, but we were not part of the history of the world in the sense, if we say history is about wars, about armies and empires. So it sort of stretched from before America was founded, stretched from Ireland to Japan. And then even Africa wasn't much in it. The main flow of history as we read about it is largely fought there. And Southeast Asia became part of that history with the coming of the Maritime Age. So the Portuguese came over and so on. And of course, we've always had sea travel here, but not in that colonizing sense. And so we get drawn in.

All of us, every part, except for Thailand to some extent, became colonies. So we were all drawn into somebody's war. Yeah. And somebody's war is—we can call it capitalism or European civilizational extension and so on—heading for China. And so we get drawn into this European obsession with the China market. Well, it always had something to do with the Chinese market because we were just next door to them. This part of the world used to export things to China, right? Or there would be Chinese sailors who would come down to collect whatever they wanted. Could be bird's nest soup or whatever. So that, of course, has been around. But once the colonialists came, it's not in one sweep, because it all happened slowly over a few hundred years. We got drawn into the struggles that originated somewhere else.

Including, although many Southeast Asians are Muslims, even Muslims are fine, their religion is okay, but this war between Christianity and Islam gets thrown in here as well. So in that sense, in modern times, the last four or five hundred years, we became part of world history, not on our conditions, but on the conditions of outside powers. So that is the basis for Southeast Asian culture and how we relate to people generally. They're rather peaceful people, right? I think it has something to do with the sea. If you get into a boat and then just go off, you don't know where you're going to land. So, you know, this thing of accepting whatever you find is a strong seafaring nature. If you're territorial, you know exactly who your neighbor is. And then you have to be this guy for ten generations.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Yeah.

#Kee Beng Ooi

You might have trouble, like you would.

#Pascal

Yeah, at least for Europe, it caused a very bellicose kind of mindset, which we're seeing flaring up again right now. But I'm very happy to get this quite hopeful perspective, actually, of yours—an

optimistic one, I would also say. Dr. Ooi, since we're nearing the end, people who would like to, let's say, follow your analysis or read about your take on things, where should they go?

#Kee Beng Ooi

Oh, well, I've got a webpage. Well, my name is Kee Beng, so I thought it would be clever to have a webpage called Wikibeng, like Wikipedia, wikibeng.com. They could go there, and most of my commentaries are available. That's a good way to think, but that's a good way to draw traffic to my website.

#Pascal

Yeah, yeah, okay. Everybody, I will actually find it and I will put the link to your webpage into the description box of this video so people can find you. Of course, the Penang Institute is also a place, right, where...

#Kee Beng Ooi

Yes. So I've run Penang Institute the last nine years now. Before that, I was at Singapore's ISEAS Institute of Civilization Studies, which is now called ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. And of course, they have a lot of articles as well that I have participated in editing and so on. So if you wanted to know a lot about commenting on Southeast Asia and the world, I suppose these are some of the good places to go.

#Pascal

Okay, I will link those in the description. And let me just mention one more time that if you want to—anyone listening—if you want to meet Dr. Ooi and a lot of other very fascinating thinkers, please do go to the Penang Peace Dialogue on September 5th and 6th. The pre-registration is still open until the 24th of August. There are free seats available through Neutrality Studies if you want to go. Otherwise, there's other ways of attending this one. Dr. Ooi, is there anything that you would like to add at this point?

#Kee Beng Ooi

Well, I hope you're coming for the Peace Dialogue.

#Pascal

I was supposed to be there, and I unfortunately cannot make it, but I will have at least two very good colleagues who will be there for Neutrality Studies, and the discussions, I'm absolutely sure, will be brilliant.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Well, a last word from me would be: I think we have to accept globalization as coming to the end of a certain stage. We have now to go back on globalization itself and do some spring cleaning, get rid of attitudes and thinking that came along the way, because it was a very conflict-laden era the last few hundred years. And a lot of our language, the language we use in international relations and in describing others, is rather confrontational and sadly rather erroneous in many ways. And the new stage of globalization would be about, well, re-looking at how we talk about each other and look at each other, and there's a need to accept difference, not just to see difference as, you know, someone is different because he's trying to catch up with me.

#Pascal

No, he's different. He's different.

#Kee Beng Ooi

You know, and if he, you know, more, more, more empathy.

#Pascal

I couldn't agree more. We need a new language and better models to conceptualize the world. And I think the world has a lot to learn from Southeast Asia. So I'm very glad to have your opinion. Dr. Oikibeng, thank you so much for your time today.

#Kee Beng Ooi

Thank you.