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## Singapore Debates America

By Paul Evans

### Synopsis

*The debate within Singapore's thinking class on America's role in Asia is closely followed internationally. While the views share many commonalities, there are also significant differences, especially over four key issues.*

### Commentary

IT IS A tribute to the newfound prominence and influence of Singapore's thinking class that its views draw careful attention in Asia and internationally. Tommy Koh's response (July, 22, 2010) to Simon Tay's March 30 PACNET and the book on which it is based, *Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post-Crisis Divide from America*, points to an important debate about the United States' role in Asia that has specific Singaporean characteristics but much wider regional and global echoes.

As a small strategically located country that is dependent on a dynamic open economy and foreign markets, with a sophisticated, outward-looking intellectual elite, deep concerns about external threats and vulnerabilities, a carefully cultivated relationship with Washington, and multi-layered connections across Asia, Singapore is a skilled diplomatic player and has a unique vantage point in considering Asia's future.

### Commonalities

In addition to Tay and Koh, recent writings by Barry Desker and Kishore Mahbubani (especially his *The New Asian Hemisphere*) underline commonalities in viewing the US as well as equally important differences. If there is a Singapore school on international policy, it has some instructive tensions.

The commonalities are considerable. They all take the US very seriously, admire its institutions of higher learning, and know it better than they do most parts of Asia. They value the stability provided by an economic and security order underpinned by a robust US presence. They see the strategic need for this presence, including the alliances. Though sensitive to the power shift underway, they don't see US-China conflict as inevitable and resist efforts to force a choice between the US and China.

Southeast Asia benefits from the presence of several external powers that prevents dominance by any one of them. They all see the virtues and limitations of the multiple species of Asian regionalism and seek to engage the US in several, but not all, of them. All generally approve of the approach of the Obama administration in altering the tenor of US-Asia relations.

## Differences

Yet as the Tay-Koh exchange indicates, the differences are equally interesting. They focus on four main issues.

First, *reading the trend line of the global balance of power*: Koh makes the case that China may be up and the US down at the moment, but that in the near term the US will “bounce back from this adversity as it had from all its previous adversities”. And it will rebound not as a hegemon but as the “undisputable leader of the world”. The history that he sees as a guide is the past century. Mahbubani has trumpeted the case that Asia’s ascendance will not be reversed. His historical time frame is the vast civilisational shifts that have produced an unprecedented moment when a strong Asia and a strong West intersect.

Desker speaks of a “Beijing Consensus” already challenging a “Washington Consensus” without predicting the long-term outcome. Tay’s world order is already multipolar where soft power is as important as hard power. Though all agree that leadership in a multipolar context looks different than in a unipolar one, they are not of a single mind about whether that multipolar era has arrived.

Second, *assessing the capacity and will of the US to sustain a leadership role*: All are aware of the huge problems facing the US, especially the massive public debt and deficit, stagnant economy, and polarised and stalemated democratic system. They differ on how quickly these problems can be overcome and whether the US can generate a sustained policy for engaging a rising Asia. It is sobering that Tay, the youngest and the one with the most recent extended experience in the US, is sufficiently worried about a deepening divide that he felt compelled to write a book to address it.

Third, *ambivalence about core US values and institutions*: Engage America, but what part? None unequivocally embraces US-style democracy. Koh makes the case for international standards that draw on US ideals; Tay supports well-defined universal values that only partially overlap with those of the US; Mahbubani trumpets the ascendance of Asian values and recommends that Americans abandon ideology and values in favour of Asian-style pragmatism. The US is welcome but needs to check at least some of its values (but not its military might or universities) at the door.

Fourth, *expectations of US leadership past and future*: The tension may center on Tay’s observation. As he states in his book: “The US presence has benefited Asia on balance and – so long as they do not seek to contain China or Asian regionalism, nor to dominate and exploit the region – Americans will be the essential partners in Asia’s rise.” Words like “on balance”, domination, exploitation, and his references in other parts of the book to US hegemony and the need for “post-American American leadership” are closer to the views of Mahbubani than Desker’s steadfast realism that eschews moral judgment or Koh’s more benign portrayal of the US as a “stakeholder in Asia’s peace and prosperity”.

## Issues of the Day

Predicting trend lines in the regional and global distribution of power, getting the right mix of values and interests in building trans-Pacific ties, connecting the alliance system and US involvement in Asian-driven institutions, getting the right historical time lines – these are the heady but unavoidable issues of the day. Is there a national capital where these issues are not being debated, even if the policy nuances differ? Is there a national capital where a careful assessment of the debates within Singapore is not of value? Stay tuned for the next and possibly bigger installment: “Debating China.”

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