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Pursuing Mutual Strategic Interests: Lee Kuan Yew's Role in Singapore–US Relations

By Ong Keng Yong

Synopsis

The close bilateral ties between Singapore and the United States centred on friendship between Mr Lee Kuan Yew and successive American leaders. He established institutions to pursue strategic interests of both countries in a pragmatic partnership.

Commentary

MR LEE Kuan Yew, who died on 23 March 2015 aged 91, has been the most instrumental factor in the development of Singapore's relations with the United States. In fact, bilateral ties were initially very much centred on the friendship between Mr Lee and successive American leaders who deeply respected his strong conviction, clear big-picture vision and extraordinary strategic leadership.

The Vietnam War could be said to have strengthened Mr Lee's cachet and standing with Washington. Mr Lee saw American participation in the Vietnam War as buying time for non-Communist states in Southeast Asia, and played a role in stiffening US resolve to resist Communism. Singapore's independent and non-aligned foreign policy orientation gave him great credence within the American policy establishment, as a neutral party supporting their military campaign in Vietnam.

A vital interpreter of events in Asia

Mr Lee remained a vital interpreter of events in Asia long after the Vietnam War ended. His standing in American policy circles has been explained by Foreign Minister K Shanmugam who notes that Mr Lee recognised some fundamental truths about the US and the world well before other states and leaders. Mr Lee saw that strong US presence was vital to maintain peace and balance in Asia as the Asian economies developed, and supported it long before it was fashionable to do so. Singapore was often in the minority of voices, sometimes even alone, in speaking up for the US in the developing world and forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement.

Later, again under Mr Lee's leadership, Singapore stepped up to help the US maintain its presence in the region even as the US drew down its assets elsewhere. In November 1990, in one of his last acts as Prime Minister, Mr Lee signed a Memorandum of Understanding with then US Vice President Dan

Quayle in Tokyo offering enhanced use of facilities in Singapore to American military aircraft and naval vessels as a contribution to sustaining US forward military position in Southeast Asia.

Even as he worked with American statesmen at the strategic level and preserved the balance of power in Asia, Mr Lee saw flaws within American society. Although he praised America's strengths, its enterprising spirit and openness to talent, Mr Lee did not shy away from speaking of America's weaknesses such as the widespread availability of guns, and as he puts it, the breakdown of civil society and erosion of the moral underpinnings of American society.

As American leaders valued Mr Lee's views on geopolitics and the world order, and admired his accomplishment, they have not taken to heart his criticism. In some cases, American opinion makers also agreed with Mr Lee's analysis of the problems troubling their country. They knew that Mr Lee believed in the American can-do way and that the US is the only country with the strength and determination to deal with the challenges faced by the global community. Even as the US was affected by the recent financial crisis and its supposed decline, Mr Lee repeatedly reminded others not to underestimate American creativity, resilience and innovative spirit. He is confident the US will find its feet again.

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger writes: *"...Lee has made himself an indispensable friend of the United States, not primarily by the power he represents, but by the excellence of his thinking. His analysis is of such quality and depth that his counterparts consider meeting with him as a way to educate themselves...Every American president who has dealt with him has benefitted from the fact that on international issues, he has identified the future of his country with the fate of democracies. Furthermore, Lee can tell us about the nature of the world that we face, especially penetrating insights into the thinking of his region. Lee's analyses shed light on the most important challenge that the United States confronts over the long term: how to build a fundamental and organic relationship with Asia, including China. There is nobody who can teach us more about the nature and the scope of this effort than Lee Kuan Yew...Lee is not only one of the seminal leaders of our period, but also a thinker recognised for his singular strategic acumen."*

A pragmatic partnership to pursue strategic interests

Mr Lee's long-term vision and strategic intellect single-handedly contributed to the cementing of the close ties that Singapore now enjoys with the US. Singapore and US officials often articulate that Mr Lee has established the institutions and processes for both countries to pursue strategic interests which would normally be impossible between a small island state and the global superpower. American policy-makers would always recall how Mr Lee developed the basis of bilateral defence cooperation, especially access arrangements for American forces in Singapore.

They also believed that it was Mr Lee's persuasive influence which laid the ground for the US to enter into negotiations with the Singapore government on a bilateral free trade agreement. Through Mr Lee's readiness to meet a large number of officials from the American policy establishment, substantial linkages have been built up which are now permanent and regular exchanges between the Singapore and US authorities.

Differences in policy and governance have surfaced from time to time. There will always be different priorities and emphasis in policy implementation but bilateral ties are now locked into a pragmatic partnership going beyond individual personalities. The solid foundation established by Mr Lee had allowed both countries to focus on the strategic issues and the big picture to substantiate the unique relationship. Ultimately, the ability of Singapore to articulate regional concerns and views, particularly on geopolitical and strategic issues, and to foster consensus in various international forums on common challenges facing the world will ensure a continuous dialogue and cooperation between the two countries.

Singapore leaders will continue to have access to the top policy-makers in Washington. Yet, they would need to establish their own level of influence and strategic value to the US. Countries in Asia have new leaders who can engage the US directly and in their own ways. This is different from the situation when Mr Lee was in government. The quality of Singapore's strategic assessment of developments in Asia and beyond will determine the level of confidence, trust and value which American policy-makers will accord to Singapore.

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