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Lee Kuan Yew and India's Turn to Pragmatism

By C. Raja Mohan

Synopsis

Although it had long disappointed Lee Kuan Yew, India's contemporary rise in Asia and the world has much to do with the adoption of economic and strategic pragmatism that the founder of modern Singapore never tired of recommending for Delhi.

Commentary

DELHI WAS irritated if not angered when Lee Kuan Yew held up a harsh mirror to India's self-defeating economic and foreign policies in the 1970s and 1980s. Personally close to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, Lee privately advised them to be more pragmatic and publicly criticised India's failures. Lee's trenchant critique, however, was rooted in a genuine affection for India, clear recognition of its potential to shape the economic and political order in Asia and the world, and deep frustration at Delhi's seeming inability to act in self-interest.

India's economic slumber, its perpetual domestic chaos, and the temptation of its political elites to blame democracy for all its ills had some influence on Lee, who held 'democracy and development' were incompatible at least in the early stages of nation-building. As India evolved in the later decades, Lee's impatience yielded to better appreciation of its complex internal dynamics and the role of democracy in managing them.

Lee sceptical but supportive

Delhi's reluctance to lend military assistance to Singapore when it became independent, disappointed Lee. If he saw India as the successor to the British Raj in providing security to smaller states of Asia, he was deeply surprised by Delhi's lack of a strategic ambition and its inability to engage in regional realpolitik. Lee was also critical of India's policy of non-alignment and its steady drift towards the Soviet Union from the 1970s. He was deeply concerned about the impact of India's closeness to Moscow on Southeast Asia's security environment in the 1980s.

When India embarked on the path of economic liberalisation and globalisation at the turn of the 1990s, Lee was sceptical but supportive. Lee was not confident that India can easily shed the burdensome legacy of state socialism accumulated since independence and quickly construct a liberal economic order at home. Lee met all the Indian leaders in the reform era from Narasimha Rao to Narendra Modi, frequently visited India and continually encouraged them to press ahead with

reforms. Despite many setbacks to Singapore's own commercial engagement with India, Lee never gave up hopes for India's economic transformation.

In the early 1990s India also sought to catch up with the economic dynamism in Southeast Asia that it once looked down upon. Rather than turn its back on India, Singapore became one of the strongest advocates of India's integration with Asia. P.V. Narasimha Rao articulated the Look East Policy in his Singapore Lecture (1994) that Lee presided over. More than a decade later, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh publicly thanked Singapore for holding India's hand at a difficult moment and facilitating its integration with all the Asean-led institutions, including the Asean Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit.

Lee's vision of India's role

As India began to generate higher economic growth rates in the 1990s, Lee was increasingly confident that India's rise was inevitable. He also saw it playing a crucial role in stabilising Asian balance of power amidst the rise of China and the strategic vacillations of America. In 2007, Lee noted that India was not seen as a threatening power in Southeast Asia, essentially because of the nature of its political system, thereby tempering some of his earlier critique of the Indian democracy.

Lee's greatest contribution was probably to make Singapore loom very large on India's economic and foreign policy radar since the 1990s. His calls on Delhi over the decades to lift the heavy hand of bureaucracy, avoid economic populism, and claim a leadership role in Asia were long rejected by the Indian political elites.

Today those ideas of Lee are very central to Indian discourse. While few in the Indian intellectual or policy elite agree with Lee's critique of democracy, his emphasis on good governance, eliminating the scourge of corruption, sustaining communal harmony are widely accepted today as critical for the nation's progress towards peace and prosperity.

Lee's stress on pragmatism and his deep suspicion of ideologies, of all kinds, now resonate with an ever larger numbers of the Indian political elite. Many state chief ministers like Chandrababu Naidu of Andhra Pradesh, Manohar Parrikar of Goa, and Narendra Modi have absorbed the ideas of Lee in developing their own approaches to governance. It is a pity, Lee will not be around to see how Prime Minister Modi, who perhaps comes closest to his notions of pragmatism, might take India forward.

Adopting Lee's strategic pragmatism

As he opened up Singapore to India's talented professionals and growing middle classes, the city state has acquired an extraordinary salience in India's world view that is way above its size and weight. In the process Lee has helped India rediscover its historical connections to Asia and renew its acquaintance with greater China. If modern Singapore was seen by the British Raj two centuries ago as a vital link in the trade between India and China and between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Lee actively egged on Delhi to cultivate a practical relationship with Beijing and end the prolonged stagnation in bilateral relations.

If Lee and Singapore want India to be more engaged in Asia, Modi has renamed India's Look East Policy as 'Act East Policy'. This is not merely a change in nomenclature, but the reflection of a new commitment to contribute to the maintenance of Asian security order. Unlike his predecessors, Modi is eager to strengthen the security partnerships with the United States and its allies in Asia, develop middle power coalitions, and lend support to weaker states. At the same time, Lee would also be pleased with Modi's decision to discard many of India's past inhibitions on economic cooperation with China.

If India in the past, had no time for Lee's suggestion that Delhi must claim the mantle of the Raj in securing Asia, Delhi now declares itself as a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean and the Asia Pacific. Although India would never move at a pace that Lee would have liked, it has begun to advance thanks to its adoption of strategic pragmatism that the founder of modern Singapore never stopped recommending for India.

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