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US Envoy's Impressions of Lee Kuan Yew

By Daniel Wei Boon Chua

Synopsis

Lee Kuan Yew's conversations with US leaders are not as widely known as his speeches. A report by a US ambassador to Singapore on Lee's October 1967 visit to the United States reveals the extent of Lee's successful diplomacy towards the US.

Commentary

PRIME MINISTER Lee Kuan Yew's first official visit to the United States from 16 to 27 October 1967 was a milestone in Singapore-US relations. Through the visit, Lee developed a better understanding of the American leadership and its people, as well as laid the foundation for economic cooperation between the two countries.

While Lee's speeches and public statements have been compiled and published, records of his meetings with foreign leaders are not as well publicised. Excerpts from a report on Lee's October 1967 visit by the first US Ambassador to Singapore, Francis J. Galbraith, demonstrate Lee Kuan Yew's ability to persuade and hold his own before American leaders and academics, who were universally impressed by the Singapore leader.

A generous welcome

In his welcome address, US President Lyndon Johnson remarked that "America welcomes a patriot, a brilliant leader, and a statesman of the New Asia", to which Lee responded: "I am almost embarrassed by the lavish words of praise that you have showered upon my colleagues and me in our modest efforts to build a more just and more equal society in a very difficult corner in Southeast Asia."

On this cordial note, Lee led his delegation to discuss ways that the United States could work with Singapore, especially after Britain's announcement of a military withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia in July 1967.

In discussions with the president and officials from the Defence and State Departments, Lee was able to convince the US government to explore possibilities of using former British naval bases for commercial ship repair and maintenance. Both Lee and his American interlocutors agreed that keeping the British in Singapore would be desirable.

But if the British were to withdraw eventually, American use of aircraft and ship repair facilities in Singapore should continue. An American military presence, albeit for commercial reasons, would contribute to a sense of stability in Singapore because of inherent US interests in Singapore's security.

Interacting with American scholars and leaders

Galbraith went on to describe Lee's interaction with audiences at Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Columbia University. Lee was "always speaking without notes" and was "well received". According to Galbraith, who was with Lee for the visits, "Lee's intellectual dimension began to unfold in their company and his exchange with them was obviously something he enjoyed and profited from".

But more than engaging in intellectual discussions, Lee managed to extract a promise from MIT's Jerome Wiesner to send a team of social scientists and technologists to Singapore to explore the development of a Southeast Asian centre for technological education.

Through Lee's speeches and conversations, Galbraith detected a growing empathy towards President Johnson and his Cabinet. "As the visit progressed," reported Galbraith, "his expressions of respect for the President, for Secretary Rusk, for Secretary McNamara, and, though less explicitly, others grew and was less hedged." It was only two years earlier, on 30 August 1965, that Lee had famously rebuked the US administration for its incompetence in resolving the conflicts in Indochina.

During his visit in October 1967, however, Lee was able to appreciate the political culture in America, as well as the domestic pressures that President Johnson faced. Lee absorbed as many lessons as he could through the conversations he had with government officials, academics and students.

Promoting Singapore as an investment hub

Perhaps Lee Kuan Yew's most impressive performance came during a luncheon with businessmen in Chicago, when he made a "pitch for American investment in Singapore". Lee described Singapore as "a good base camp where businessmen could 'leave their expensive machines' and their families in confidence while they sallied forth into the less certain areas".

Galbraith also reported that Lee "amused" his audience with statements such as "you can get a telephone connection with anyplace in the world in five minutes and if you can't let me know and I'll chop someone's head off"! Lee's message to American businessmen was clear – he wanted to create an image of a "no-nonsense" Singapore government and "a people willing and able to work".

Lee did not wait for US investors to serendipitously discover Singapore as a perfect destination for capital. He seized every opportunity to promote Singapore and stressed the efficiency and quality of the labour force in the country. With his deft diplomacy, Lee Kuan Yew was able to convince American oil companies like Mobil Oil and Esso to build oil refineries in Singapore worth up to US\$105 million.

The confidence that American investors had in the Singapore leadership and its people brought in large amounts of foreign investments that pulled Singapore out of the economic debacle created by high unemployment, rapid population growth, loss of jobs due to the British military withdrawal and loss of markets due to Singapore's separation from Malaysia.

First steps towards US-Singapore accord

The October 1967 trip was after all Lee Kuan Yew's first official visit to the United States. Hence, there were aspects of Lee's thinking that the US ambassador felt difficult to accept. "Brilliant as he is," remarked Galbraith, "Lee has some rather blind prejudices and narrow interpretations of history, and his attention is often very hard to command to try to rebut these. But when one can get him to listen, he listens intently and absorbs what one tells him."

Ambassador Galbraith concluded his report with a strong recommendation for the US government to engage closely with Lee and Singapore. He ended his 16-page report with these words:

“I think it is very important that we find ways to continue dialogue and contact between Lee and our top men in Government and some of our more responsible academic leaders. Through such continued exchange, we may be able to help Lee exert his considerable talents as a ‘political educationalist’ on other young Asian leaders and potential leaders in Southeast Asia in a way that will enhance their admiration for and exertion of rationality, the most needed commodity of all in the area.”

US Secretary of State William Rogers, who served during President Richard Nixon’s first term, once said that “Lee Kuan Yew is Singapore”. Singapore’s national interests were always high on his priorities whenever he engaged with foreign leaders. Lee’s dexterous diplomacy not only made Singapore relevant to American interests during the height of the Cold War, but his political acumen provided the leadership for regional security and economic development.

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