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Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew's Worldview

By Ang Cheng Guan

Synopsis

The thinking of Singapore's first prime minister has profoundly shaped the country's foreign policy. It is an embodiment of his worldview.

Commentary

INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE'S foreign policy was shaped principally by founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, with foreign minister S Rajaratnam and Goh Keng Swee, defence and finance minister, when there were economic implications. Indeed historians who have perused the archival documents, both in Singapore and abroad, would attest that it is impossible to reconstruct the history of Singapore's foreign policy without constant reference to Lee because he figures so prominently in most of the documents.

Lee's influence owed to both his strong character and longevity. He died on 23 March 2015 age 91, while Rajaratnam died in 2006 at age 90 and Goh in 2010 also at age 91. Even after he retired as prime minister in 1990 Lee continued to be a guiding force in Singapore's foreign policy through his "mentoring sessions" with cabinet ministers as Senior Minister and later Minister Mentor.

Asia's leading strategic thinker

Singapore's foreign policy can be explained in terms of "agency" - the characteristic mindset of the leader, in this case Lee Kuan Yew and the intellectual assumptions underlying Singapore's approach to world affairs under his leadership and guidance. This is an explanation of the evolution of Singapore's foreign policy rather than its application.

Lee's tenure as prime minister coincided with the period of the Cold War. His time as senior minister, from 1991 to 2004 and minister mentor from August 2004 to May 2011, fell rather neatly into the post-Cold War period. However Lee had a very well-developed sense of history and a dynamic grasp of geostrategic reality even from the 1950s when he embarked on a political career.

As Lee was so influential in the making of Singapore's foreign policy – the echoes of his thinking can be heard in every single foreign policy speech and interview given by the second and third generation Singapore leadership – an understanding of his beliefs and premises is imperative for understanding and analysing Singapore's foreign policy.

While much has been written about Lee and his leadership role in the development of Singapore, almost all have focused on his domestic policies and on issues of governance, with very little on his foreign policy thinking. This is somewhat surprising considering that Lee is generally acknowledged as Asia's leading strategic thinker, one who helps "us find direction in a complicated world".

Pragmatist, not ideologue

Lee had this uncanny ability to foresee the political trends that helped Singapore to be so nimble in the conduct of its foreign relations. One more than one occasion, Lee had said that he was not an ideologue but a pragmatist and that his thinking and worldview were not shaped by any particular theory but "the result of a gradual growing up from a child to adolescent to a young student to a mature adult".

On the overarching framework which shaped his understanding of international relations, Lee said "It's always been the same from time immemorial". Tribes always fight for supremacy, he explained. Bringing this to its logical conclusion, Lee predicted that by the 22nd century, China and the United States would either have to learn to co-exist or would destroy each other. Although Lee claimed he did not adhere to any theory or philosophy of foreign policy, his overall thinking did resemble that of a "soft realist" - someone who believed in the realist principles about the nature of power but at the same time accommodated perspectives that were liberal or idealist-oriented such as the value of institutions and global cooperation.

Lee's life-long preoccupation was the survival of Singapore. This was his perennial foreign policy challenge – How to "seize opportunities that come with changing circumstances or to get or of harm's way". In his view, to achieve this would require "a prime minister and a foreign minister who are able to discern future trends in the international political, security and economic environment and positions ourselves (Singapore) bilaterally or multilaterally to grasp the opportunities ahead of others".

Lee was prescient in projecting the shifting balance of power from a European Western dominance of the period from the 1500s to the 1900s, to one in which China and India, and Asia in general, would become dominant once again in the 21st century. By 1985 he already foresaw the rise of Asia in the 21st century, anticipated the inexorable rise of China, and to a lesser extent India, with the relative reduction of influence of the Western world.

Survival of the small state

Lee was impressed by the realities of power behind the formalism in the United Nations and other international organisations and the importance of having the ability to enforce sanctions to uphold international law. He saw the need for small states to arrange relationships with bigger countries to ensure their independence and to exercise indirect influence. At the same time, he had a clear vision of the possibilities and limits of multilateral organisations such as the Afro-Asian Solidarity Organisation and Movement of Non-Aligned Nations and the Commonwealth of Nations.

While acknowledging the need for Singapore to join these organisations to gain acceptance, Lee was realistic about their ability to protect and promote the interests of members against the efforts of the superpowers to divide and patronize them. He always stressed the need for Singapore to be nimble and alert to ensure that in any arrangement or shifts in the balance of power it had the preponderant force on its side. Starting from first principles, he saw the survival of small states like Singapore as being intertwined with the stability and wellbeing of their regional neighbourhood and the dynamic balance and economic interaction of the global powers.

Finally Lee Kuan Yew had been very committed to the fundamentals of his philosophy of foreign policy. He had also been remarkably consistent in his views about the balance of power, the inter-relationship between economics and politics, and the role of the great powers in the international system. He certainly had the ability to sense change, for example, the need to cultivate the Americans when the British could no longer be counted on, or the rise of China.

But for all the accolades that have been heaped on him, he professed that he did not know when he started his political life in the 1950s that he would be on the winning side of the Cold War and that

Singapore would be what it is today – an implied reminder of the role of contingency in the study of history.

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