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Post-Lee Kuan Yew World: Is His Strategic Vision Still Relevant?

By Han Fook Kwang

SYNOPSIS

Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew shaped the country's foreign policy since its independence in 1965. But the world has changed much with the shifting geopolitical balance of power and disruptions caused by digital technology. Are Lee's thinking and strategic vision still relevant in this new world?

COMMENTARY

IT HAS been four years since Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew passed away, and how much the world has changed. If he were alive, he might not recognise large parts of it:

The United Kingdom on the verge of leaving the European Union; the United States and China in a trade war; the election of President Donald Trump bringing with it much uncertainty over America's international role; and the surprising turn of events in the Korean peninsula. Nearer home: The shock return to power of Dr Mahathir Mohamad as prime minister of Malaysia, at 92.

LKY Unlikely to have Foreseen Earthshakers

He did not foresee any of these events. I know because I was involved in his last book which was precisely about how he saw the world unfolding in the next 10 years and what challenges it would pose for Singapore.

The interviews for the book *One Man's View of the World* were held in 2012 during the last years of his life to tap his knowledge of international issues based on his more than 50 years experience dealing with world leaders and Singapore's foreign policy.

Though he did not predict the subsequent earthshaking events, he was mostly right about the larger forces and trends that shape the world. He did not predict Brexit but he was convinced the EU could not continue in its present form.

He did not foresee a Trump presidency but he was sure America would continue to be the world's foremost superpower for a long time given its enterprising and creative people. The US has now the best performing economy in the Western world with the longest sustained period of job creation.

An Even More Uncertain World

The world has become even more uncertain since his death with disruptive changes brought about by digital technology, the shifting balance of geopolitical power, the rise of populism and the popular backlash against globalisation.

Are Lee's thinking and insights still relevant in this rapidly changing world? On the fourth anniversary of his passing, the question continues to loom large especially for Singapore.

As a small state dependent on the outside world for its economic growth, and on larger powers to keep the regional peace, it is particularly vulnerable to how the international order is changing.

Four Pillars of Lee's Strategic Vision

There are four elements of his approach to foreign policy which continue to be relevant but which will also come under the greatest pressure in the years to come.

Strong Defence

First is the idea that a small state like Singapore needs a credible armed forces to deter would-be aggressors. It was one of his first priorities when the country suddenly became independent in 1965, and found itself having to build an army from scratch.

But his first lesson on military power came much earlier when, as a young 18-year old student, he came face to face with a Japanese soldier in 1941 from the invading army which had just inflicted a crushing defeat on British forces in Singapore and Malaya.

He would say in the book *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man And His Ideas* which I co-authored: "The dark ages had descended on us. Looking back, I think it was the biggest single political education of my life because for three and a half years I saw the meaning of power and how power and politics and government went together..."

The experience of the Japanese Occupation and separation from Malaysia had a profound impact on Lee's thinking about security. Singapore has since been unrelenting in building up its armed forces, allocating 30% of government expenditure this year on defence, security and diplomacy.

Developing this military capability has also meant closer ties with the US from which

Singapore buys most of its military equipment including advanced fighter aircraft. Singapore's close security ties with the US is a key part of Lee's strategic vision but it will also come under pressure in the years to come as the balance of power shifts to a rising China.

Whatever happens, Singapore's commitment to its own defence which Lee first defined will not change. This was how he put it in *Hard Truths*, a book I was involved in just before he stepped down from government in 2011: "Without a strong economy, there can be no defence. Without a strong defence, there will be no Singapore. It will become a satellite, cowed and intimidated by its neighbours."

More Shades For Cover

The second pillar of Lee's foreign policy stems from his realist view of how a small state like Singapore can best survive in a world dominated by bigger, more powerful actors.

"Singapore has to take the world as it is; it is too small to change it. But we can maximise the space we have to manoeuvre among the 'big trees' in the region. That has been our approach and we will have to be nimble and resourceful to be able to continue doing so," he said in *One Man's View*.

Creating space for Singapore has been an unending effort for Singapore policymakers and diplomats since its independence, resulting in the many linkages the country has established internationally, and its support of multilateral organisations such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Lee believed regional peace and stability was best achieved by having the major powers engaged in the region, not just the US, but also China, Japan, Australia, India and the European countries.

Despite the US being the pre-eminent power in Asia throughout his years in office, he did not anchor Singapore solely in the American camp. Instead he worked even harder expanding Singapore's international space, for example, working closely with Chinese leaders to develop their industrial parks, and expanding China-Singapore economic and political ties.

But China's rise and its growing assertiveness in pursuing its territorial claims in the South China Seas will test how ASEAN, including Singapore, manage the new reality.

For Lee, the answer lies in continued US engagement in the region: "If there is no counterbalance from the US, there will be no room to manoeuvre for smaller Asian countries. When you have two trees instead of one, you can choose which shade to be under." If Lee were alive today, he would continue looking for more shades.

Good Buddies

The third element of Lee's strategic vision has less to do with strategy and more with what he did to realise it – developing close relationships with leaders that mattered to

Singapore. The best example of this was his personal friendship with then Indonesian President Suharto.

They couldn't have got off to a worst start after Singapore executed two Indonesian saboteurs in 1968. But the two leaders worked at it, the friendship blossomed and they met regularly over two decades to resolve issues between the two countries.

Similarly, China-Singapore and US-Singapore ties have benefitted from Lee's personal relationship with many of their leaders who respected his deep insights and forthright views. He was one of a kind, and it would be asking too much to expect Singapore leaders to do the same.

But they have to develop their own style and working relationship with their foreign counterparts. When the world is more uncertain, it is even more important to be able to reach out to reliable friends.

Home Support: Whither Singapore's Exceptionalism?

Finally, Lee's strategic vision of Singapore's place in the world cannot be divorced from how he saw the country's own identity: A vulnerable nation which had to be exceptional in South East Asia to survive.

He put it bluntly in *Hard Truths*: "I decided we had to differentiate ourselves from them or we are finished. "They are not clean systems, we run clean systems. Their rule of law is wonky, we stick to the law. We become reliable and credible to investors..."

This exceptionalism has profound implications for Singapore's foreign policy and will invariably create problems with neighbouring countries from time to time. When you are different, you have to work harder at your relationships, and Singapore leaders will have to manage them deftly.

But the greatest challenge to Lee's vision of Singapore's exceptionalism will come internally. Can its people and government maintain the high standards, even as other countries progress to narrow the gap? If they don't, all the other elements of Singapore's foreign policy fall apart. That's what it means to say that foreign policy begins at home.

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