THE RISING ASIA ROUNDTABLE REVIEW

ROUNDTABLE REVIEW OF ANG CHENG GUAN, *SINGAPORE'S GRAND STRATEGY* (SINGAPORE: NUS PRESS, 2023), 195 PAGES.

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INTRODUCTION
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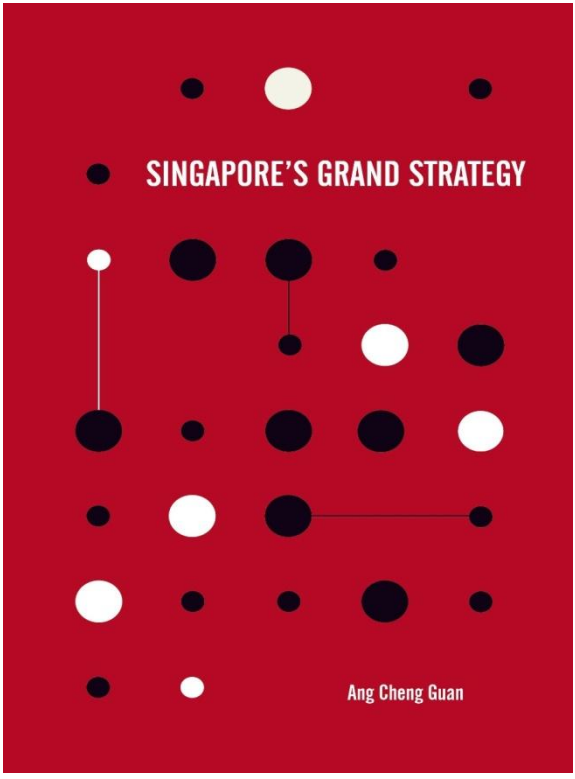
Singapore's Journey From the Dream of Being the "New York" of Malaysia to a Small State With a "Grand Strategy"

The arrival of this new book by the scholar, Ang Cheng Guan, is commendable for its timeliness. What makes it particularly relevant to the present historical moment is that Singapore expects a transition in its political leadership in the next few years, with a general election due before November 2025. Ang points out that the "crafting of grand strategy was, and still is, concentrated in the topmost ranks of government," which is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, even though foreign policy figures more prominently in the island city-state's domestic discourse (p. 159).

What are the elements that constitute the island city-state's grand strategy? Ang explains that "Singapore has had a singular and crystal-eyed strategic priority or goal in place since 1965: to ensure its survival and independence as a nation city-state" (p. 153). Its founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, articulated the core of this policy in these words: Singapore "cannot be a satellite of any nation" because unless it is able "to retain its own point of view," "it would lose all effectiveness in the new world order" (p. 153).[1] The strategic priority, Ang writes, stems from the belief that small states cannot survive for long. He refers to Lee Kuan Yew's remark that in the second-half of the twentieth

[1] Ang cites Clarissa Oon, "MM Lee: We Cannot Be a Satellite of Any Nation," *The Straits Times,* December 30, 2009.

century "Southeast Asian island nations are a political joke" (p. 153).[2] But the view that an independent Singapore was unviable and must be a part of Malaysia in order to survive—even serving as a "New York" of Malaysia—had to be suddenly revised when Singapore left Malaysia in 1965.



Against this brief historical background, Ang shows that Singapore's grand strategy is operationalized or manifested in the following ways. First and foremost, through carefully managing its relations with immediate neighbors Malaysia and Indonesia, and beyond

[2] Ang cites Lee Kuan Yew's speech at the Singapore Legislative Assembly on March 5, 1957, quoted in Bilahari Kausikan, "A 'Happy Mistake': Bilahari Kausikan on Singapore's Biggest Foreign Policy Blunder," *The Straits Times*, January 21, 2020.

them with the United States and China (p. 157). Second, it operates by supporting economic and security multilateralism, under Lee Kuan Yew's call for multilateral cooperation for the region as early as 1966—although the idea of multilateral security arrangements was way ahead of its time. As Lee saw it, the concept of national self-sufficiency was old-fashioned and dated: it worked only for countries with large land mass like the United States and the Soviet Union (Ibid.).

The second and third manifestations of Singapore's grand strategy are in international law and defence, driven by the logic that "small states cannot survive if interaction is governed by relative power" (p. 158). Thus, the island city-state has always advocated settling disputes through international law, such as its territorial disputes with Malaysia, the issue of the South China Sea, and Russia's annexation of Crimea. While the island city-state takes international law seriously, its leaders are aware that it is important to have a strong defence capability, in which the Singapore Armed Forces serves as the final guarantor of the country's sovereignty (Ibid.). While the country needed British military bases in its early years because it was unable to defend itself, that is no longer the case.

I will dwell a little more on this point. When Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen was asked why defence was not included in the "Forward Singapore conversation" begun by the country's fourth-generation leadership in mid-2022, he stated, "Omission doesn't reflect a lack of importance. Also not included were home security and foreign affairs," explaining that it did not always lend itself to public discourses (p. 159).[3] Yet, Ang explains that he has identified five speeches by the country's leaders from 1965 to the present that contain the core of the

[3] Ang cites "On Why Defence was Not Included in the Forward Singapore Conversation," *The Straits Times*, July 1, 2022.

country's grand strategy, arguing that there was no evidence of change to the strategies detailed in those speeches, or the emergence of any alternative strategy, and that the fourth-generation leaders—Heng Swee Keat, Lawrence Wong, Chan Chun Seng, and Ong Ye Kung, and others—have continued "to sing from the same song sheet" (Ibid.). The leaders of the second, third, and fourth generation leaders sang a tune whose lyrics were written by the founding father, Lee Kuan Yew.

Singapore saw little need to change its grand strategy despite having witnessed the Cold War (Ibid.). It stuck to what worked because the major powers such as the United States, China, Malaysia and Indonesia, with their own motives, had implicitly been cooperative with Singapore, Ang explains. The strategy has, so far, succeeded, he argues, but adds that it remains to be seen whether the current U.S.-China rivalry would lead to, or compel, a change (p. 160). Singaporeans are acutely aware that they could be placed in an uncomfortable position by the friction between these two giants.

Ang's book also ticks the right boxes. First, the topic of a grand strategy for Singapore had suffered long neglect, evident in the lack of a full-length book on it. Ang's is the first. There are, of course, existing studies of the foreign affairs, and security and defence matters relating to Singapore, but none on the island city-state's grand strategy. Ang fills the gap by drawing attention to his new perspective on an ignored topic. His book pulls together the scattered pieces of a puzzle to cobble together a comprehensive account, as there was no historical account which recounted and described the evolution of Singapore's foreign and security/defence policies in a single narrative.

Second, Ang demonstrates in his Introduction that the existing literature (most, if not all) is written by political scientists, as well as the

fact that these books are mostly dated. What Ang has done is to reintegrate history into the discussion of grand strategy because the concept is always rooted "in a specific context" and "a particular set of assumptions" (p. 9).

Third, the author makes the audaciously plausible argument that it is very possible, even recommended, for small states to create their grand strategies especially in rough and tough times. In this book, he achieves the goal of contributing to the scholarly discussion of grand strategy (note the number of universities which have developed centers for the study of grand strategy in recent years). Grand strategy, naturally, is not the preserve of superpowers and small states also have it (p. 3).

But what is grand strategy? Some scholars believe it is "a useful concept worthy of both research and application. It "is no silver bullet, but is indispensable" (p. 2). Others believe its value is limited: "to debate grand strategy is to indulge in navel-gazing while the world burns," and so "it is time to operate without one" (Ibid.).

For Ang, his two main objectives of writing this book are, first, to debunk the view that grand strategy is the preserve of great states or big powers and that small and medium-sized states do not have the wherewithal to craft it (p. 3). Ang is not persuaded by such an argument. He quotes the scholar Rebecca Friedman Lissner—"the grand strategy literature suffers needlessly from American parochialism . . . grand strategy debates are likely to proliferate and amplify as power continues to diffuse over the coming decades" (Ibid.). His second purpose it "to fill a gap in the literature of the post-1945 diplomatic, defence, and security history of Singapore, which historians yielded to political scientists (p. 150).

Before he got started, he grappled with the definitional issue. This is a crucial matter because, as Lukas Milevski noted, "the modern literature on grand strategy, emanating from multiple disciplines, does not adhere to a single overarching understanding of the term, which is frequently invoked without definition at all" (p. 4). Ang again cites Milevski, who has counted six different interpretations of the term: thus, grand strategy "remains a standardless, incoherent concept" in need of "rehabilitation."

In its applicability, Ang draws two conclusions. One, that grand strategy must, in James Boys' view, be "specific enough to identify a series of criteria, yet fluid enough to adapt to changing circumstances as well as interpretation" (p. 7). Two, although grand strategy is usually fixed on foreign and national security policy, it must take into account the domestic dimension (Ibid.).

Having said that, Ang declares that his book will "adopt an expansive definition of the concept [of grand strategy] and will not privilege any school of thought or discipline" (p. 9). "It will adopt all four lenses—history, theory, practice, and military." While there may be a fifth or a sixth lens belonging to other disciplines, the author confines his gaze to the four. His book also directly and indirectly (through memoirs) engages with practitioners of the craft, and considers both the international and domestic contexts that undergird the development and evolution of Singapore's grand strategy (p. 10).

There's a certain newness about this book because the term grand strategy has not generally been used in the context of Singapore (p. 150). Ang tells us that it is more common to talk or read about the island city-state's foreign or defence policies, or sometimes about its National Strategy or National Security Strategy. All of these formulations refer to the same concerns as those of grand strategy (Ibid.). China, Ang states,

also does not use the term grand strategy officially, although Chinese academics have used it since the 1980s (pp. 150-151).

Ang himself finds the term useful, believing that world leaders do actually "draw on some set of notions about how the world works as they respond to new situations," and that without a grand strategy "policymaking is reactive, often haphazard, and always dangerous" (p. 151).[4]

The upshot? Ang agrees with President Dwight D. Eisenhower's view (cited by Hal Brands and others) that grand strategy is not "some immutable blueprint from which policy must never deviate" (Ibid.). It actually "requires purpose and a willingness to look ahead," and at the same time it "demands significant tactical flexibility as well" (Ibid.). In the end, Ang chooses a simple and concise description, one offered by Paul Feaver, who defined grand strategy as "the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state's deliberate effort to harness political, military, diplomatic and economic tools together to advance that state's national interest (p. 152).[5]

With this brief introduction, I welcome our three roundtable participants, Manjeet S. Pardesi, Bich Tran, and Toh Han Shih to present their reviews. I appreciate the response of the author, Ang Cheng Guan, to their views.

Professor Pardesi, a political scientist, wonders if Singapore was able to have a grand strategy because of its good fortune in having farsighted leaders that articulated the essence of its grand strategy, or did systemic factors also matter? Pardesi wonders how much of the

[4] Ang cites Robert Wilkie, "America Needs a Grand Strategy," The Heritage Foundation, November 3, 2021.

[5] Ang cites Peter Feaver, "What is Grand Strategy and Why Do We Need It?", *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2009.

success of Singapore's grand strategy was an outcome of the choices of others—because strategy is relational, and one state responds to the policies of significant others, and vice-versa.

Postdoctoral Fellow Bich Tran points out that historian Ang offers the perspective of his own discipline to the study of Singapore's grand strategy, which sets his work apart from the approach of political scientists. Rather than devising theoretical frameworks, Ang plunges into the historical intricacies, capturing the ebb and flow of time. Bich writes that while political scientists often generalize using overarching trends and patterns, historians like Ang spotlight specific events, the significance of individual roles, and the unique nuances of various eras.

Taking a realist angle, the scholar Toh Han Shih is concerned that the worsening of U.S.-China relations since 2017 had put Singapore in a tough spot. In 2017, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, a son of Lee Kuan Yew, was quoted in Ang's book saying, "As a friend to both America and China, Singapore can be put in a difficult situation if there is . . . friction between the two giants" (p. 160). Han Shih sees two challenges for Singapore's future leaders. One is whether they can be as farsighted in foreseeing global trends as the first leaders of Singapore like Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee. The other challenge is to skillfully adapt its grand strategy amidst hostile U.S.-China relations.

In his response to the reviews, Ang employs his "favorite quote" by Lee Kuan Yew which he cites at the end of his book, that "in an imperfect world, we have to seek the best accommodation possible. And no accommodation is permanent. If it lasts long enough for progress to be made until the next set of arrangements can be put in place, let us be grateful for it" (Ibid.). Singapore's Grand Strategy is, therefore, always dynamic and is not cast in stone, Ang posits.