



# THE RISING ASIA ROUNDTABLE REVIEW

## ROUNDTABLE REVIEW OF ANG CHENG GUAN'S SINGAPORE'S GRAND STRATEGY

REVIEW BY MANJEET S. PARDESI

*Associate Professor of International Relations, Victoria University of Wellington*

## Singapore's (Thus Far) Successful Grand Strategy of Ensuring Success

Singapore is one of the most successful states in the modern world. According to the International Monetary Fund, Singapore is the richest country in Asia and the fifth richest in the world when measured by GDP per capita with an annual income of US\$91,100.<sup>1</sup> Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index ranks Singapore at number eight in Asia—and at number one in Southeast Asia—in terms of its “comprehensive power.”<sup>2</sup> This measure includes several factors such as material power as well as resilience, with the latter also taking account of “internal stability.” In fact, in terms of its “military capability,” Singapore with its 5.5 million people is the strongest country in Southeast Asia, ahead of regional

---

<sup>1</sup> “GDP per capita, current prices,” International Monetary Fund, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD?year=2023>

<sup>2</sup> Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index, 2023 edition, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org>.

heavyweights such as Vietnam (with its 97 million people) and even Indonesia (with over 270 million people), according to this index. And finally, according to the Fragile States Index, Singapore is the most stable state in Asia, narrowly beating the region's established democracies in Japan and South Korea.<sup>3</sup>

These accomplishments are even more remarkable for a country that became independent only in 1965 after close to one-and-a-half centuries of colonialism. When Singapore made its national/international debut, its hinterland was in Malaysia and the city-state had no means to defend itself. How did Singapore survive and thrive? Ang Cheng Guan has written a wonderful book to explain how Singapore has navigated the uncertainties of the international system that it has encountered over the past five-to-six decades. He convincingly explains that Singapore's "grand strategy" has revolved around the need to remain "relevant, useful and successful" while ensuring its "survival and independence."<sup>4</sup> In fact, he demonstrates that Singapore's grand strategy "has been remarkably consistent since the country came into being in 1965" (p. 152).

As he points out, Singapore has not fought any war since 1965 despite sometimes frosty relations with Malaysia, especially given their history. He reminds us that Singapore was not "thrown" out of Malaysia but emerged after "a secretly negotiated secession," even as the old narrative of being thrown out has persisted (p. 17). The fact that Indonesia, Singapore's other neighbor, was pursuing the policy of *Konfrontasi*, and perceived Singapore "as a third China" (p. 29) made the new city-state's regional environment even more difficult. Furthermore,

<sup>3</sup> Fragile States Index, 2023, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/FSI-2023-DOWNLOAD.xlsx>

<sup>4</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore's Grand Strategy* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2023), 153.

these challenges need to be seen in the context of Singapore's multiethnic/multiracial society with its significant Malay and Indian minorities among others living amidst the majority Chinese ethnic group.

Given this background, Ang's larger point is that Singapore has practiced the art of grand strategy. There is a voluminous literature on grand strategy discussed in Ang's Introductory chapter where he notes that scholars from "multiple disciplines" have studied this concept (p. 4). However, this literature largely attributes the art of grand strategy to the superpowers, great powers, and rising powers of the world. Nevertheless, Ang shows that purposive action to create a socially cohesive state domestically, to entwine economics and security, to make as many friends as possible (and to make few or no enemies), and to enhance a state's international space through success at home and abroad (while working with others wherever possible), thereby emerging *successful* in the international system, is not the forte of the big powers only. In fact, small states can and do think and act grand strategically as the Singaporean case demonstrates.

Ang takes this rather expansive definition of grand strategy, one that combines "history, theory, practice, and the military," (p. 9) to show how Singapore has played this ends-means game remarkably well over the decades. He explicitly notes that his is an analytical approach to "declaratory" grand strategy because not only has Singapore never used this term in an official sense but also because Singapore's archival records as they pertain to foreign/defense policy remain either sealed or have "severely restrictive access conditions" (pp. 10-11). Nevertheless, it is still possible to reconstruct Singapore's grand strategy from the publicly available material and from making judicious use of American, Australian, and British sources as Ang has done.

In broad terms, Ang reconstructs Singapore's grand strategy by focusing on five speeches and three prime ministers. The five speeches include Lee Kuan Yew's "Big and Small Fishes in Asian Waters" (1966), Goh Keng Swee's "What Kind of War?" (1971), S. Rajaratnam's "Singapore: The Global City" (1972), and Lee Hsien Loong's "Security Options for Small States" (1984) and "Choice and Conviction—The Foreign Policy of a Little Red Dot" (2012). These speeches by Singapore's most notable leaders, past and present, "distil the essence" of Singapore's grand strategy for Ang (p. 159). While this short review cannot go into the granular details of these speeches, it is important to note that they contain the core principles that have informed the Singaporean approach to the world. These principles include the building of a harmonious multiethnic society domestically; the creation of a strong military, not just to defend Singapore against external aggression and as a deterrent force, but also as a nation-building strategy that promotes domestic cohesion; to growing economically by taking advantage of the secure environment thus created that in turn will contribute to enhanced security; the establishment of economic and social connections with near neighbors and distant friends globally by giving them a stake in Singapore's success; being sensitive to the changes in regional and global power configurations by fostering ties with everyone (even if to different degrees with different partners); and to following international rules and norms while working with others.

Although the specific policies undertaken at different points in time since 1965 in support of these (and related) principles might have varied, they were essentially about ensuring Singapore's success as a polity, society, and as an economy, while maintaining its relevance for its neighbors and the major powers of the world. The empirical part of Ang's book where he provides the details of these policies is divided into

five chapters. The first three chapters focus on the Lee Kuan Yew years given his formative and long role as well as the turbulent environment that Singapore found itself in during its early years. The remaining two chapters focus on periods associated with Singapore's two other Prime Ministers, Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong. Stylistically, the chapters are organized along Singapore's relations with its two immediate neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia, and the two most important great powers in the region, the United States and China. The chapter on the current period (the Lee Hsien Loong years) also briefly looks at Japan, India, and Australia in the context of Singapore's grand strategy.

The empirical chapters are thematically rich and full of very useful information. For example, Ang mentions that Israel helped Singapore develop its armed forces after independence, and that Israeli advisors "came disguised as Mexicans" (p. 34). Taiwan also helped train Singaporean pilots in addition to providing assistance with the building of the Singapore navy. We are also told that "Singapore's first Air Force and Navy chiefs originally served in the Taiwanese military" (p. 71). In more recent years, Singapore has tried to skillfully navigate the growing Sino-American rivalry. Singapore has robust strategic ties with the United States. Not only does Singapore champion for America's continued security presence in the region but the 2019 defense pact "allows American forces to use Singapore's air and naval bases until 2035" (p. 132). At the same time, Singapore has tried to play a role in "connecting" China and the West, while also remaining relevant for China's ongoing economic transformation (pp. 117-8, and 133). As China's economic rise continues and poses new uncertainties, Singapore has also been welcoming of Japan's larger role in the region, while also trying to connect India and Australia with Southeast Asia (pp. 135-6).

Post-2017, however, Singapore's geopolitical environment has changed considerably. The Sino-American rivalry has become intensified, and economic globalization has also come under stress in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly challenging for Singapore that has thus far avoided taking sides in the Sino-American rivalry, and because Singapore's (economic) success was at least partly a function of globalization. Singapore prefers to work with both the United States and China. But if tensions related to Taiwan or economic decoupling/de-risking between the China and America increase then they will shrink Singapore's strategic space. Although Singapore is likely to face tough choices on these (and other) matters in the years ahead, Ang tells us that Singapore's next generation leaders have imbibed the core principles guiding Singapore's grand strategy (p. 148). Therefore, Singapore is reasonably well-prepared to chart the next chapter of its (geo)political trajectory.

**A**ng has written a wonderful book that cogently shows that not only does the small state of Singapore "think big," but that under its enlightened leadership it has also "refused to accept its smallness" as its destiny as demonstrated by its successful grand strategy. Ang's book is likely to become the "go-to" book on Singapore's foreign/security policy, and of course, grand strategy. Nevertheless, the book left me with two questions. Given that I am a political scientist while Ang is an historian, these questions reveal my disciplinary biases and do not take away from Ang's compelling analysis.

First, is Singapore's grand strategy simply a function of agency (the fortune of having far-sighted leaders who were able to articulate the essence of Singapore's grand strategy and act accordingly), or do systemic factors also matter? And if so, then how? To be fair, these issues

are hardly absent in Ang's excellent book. For example, Ang notes that Lee understood that America's "involvement in Vietnam was buying time for Southeast Asian countries including Singapore to develop" (p. 63). What was the role of such contingencies in ensuring Singapore's success? This is not to say that these contingencies automatically promoted development because visionary leadership that could pursue appropriate policies was obviously crucial. But how much do systemic factors (including geography) matter as opposed to agentic ones when it comes to explaining the Singapore story? And what happens in the future when the system itself is not so supportive?

This leads me to my second question. How much of Singapore's grand strategic success is an outcome of the choices of others? After all, strategy is relational, and one responds to the policies of significant others (and vice-versa). Furthermore, power asymmetry remains a fact of international life for Singapore despite the city-state's multiple successes thus far. Here it is worth quoting from Lee's "Big and Small Fishes" speech. In response to a question at the end of his speech, Lee noted the following: "I would say that if people played the ethnic line, then in the end it must be decided on ethnic grounds. And in that case, it will be the big fishes that will really dominate Asian waters . . . I would like to believe that there is sufficient wisdom amongst the leaders of the big and smaller nations to realise that that means unhappiness for everybody for a very long time."<sup>5</sup> While Ang rightly notes that ordinary Singaporeans and the leaders of this small fish "overall still value racial harmony" (p. 85), what happens when Asia's medium fishes such Indonesia and Malaysia play the ethnic card, especially if China and

---

<sup>5</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, "Big and Small Fishes in Asian Waters," Singapore Government Press Statement, June 15, 1966, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19660615.pdf>

India, the region's big fishes with their diasporic and ethnic connections to the multiethnic Singapore also do so?

### **Note on the Reviewer**

Manjeet S. Pardesi is Associate Professor of International Relations in the Political Science and International Relations Programme, and Asia Research Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. His research interests include Historical International Relations, Great Power Politics, Asian security, and the Sino-Indian rivalry. He is the co-author of *The Sino-Indian Rivalry: Implications for Global Order* (with Sumit Ganguly and William R. Thompson, Cambridge University Press, 2023). He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled *Worlds in Contrast: Hegemonic and Multiplex Orders in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean* (with Amitav Acharya). He is the Managing Editor of the journal *Asian Security* (since June 2018).