THE RISING ASIA ROUNDTABLE REVIEW

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

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Historian Ang Fills a Gap in the Literature Dominated by Political Scientists

While the concept of "grand strategy" is often associated with great powers, there has been an increasing recognition of sub-great-power grand strategy. For example, *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy*, edited by Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs, dedicates a chapter on "The Grand Strategies of Small States" by Anders Wivel.[1] Another case in point is the book *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases,* edited by Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich.[2] The contributing authors examine grand strategies not only of major powers—the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom but also of pivotal powers—Brazil, India, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union.

[1] *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy,* ed. Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[2] *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases,*ed.Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Singapore's Grand Strategy by Ang Cheng Guan contributes to the scholarly debate and literature on "grand strategy" by showing that even city-states like Singapore, despite their limited natural resources and small populations, are capable of formulating grand strategies. Given the growing importance of Southeast Asia in the intensifying China-U.S. strategic competition, Ang's book provides a much-needed case study from this pivotal region in the existing literature on grand strategy. Additionally, this book helps fill a gap in the post-1965 historical study of Singapore's diplomacy, defence, and security policies, previously dominated by political scientists.

Ang offers a historian's perspective to the study of Singapore's grand strategy, setting his work apart from the approach of political scientists. Instead of constructing broad theoretical frameworks, he delves into the historical intricacies, capturing the ebb and flow of time. 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. Ang posits that Lee Kuan Yew, S. Rajaratnam, and Goh Keng Swee, frequently mentioned throughout the book, were the "makers and shapers" of Singapore's grand strategy, with Lee being the central figure (p. 22). Lee's influence persisted up to, and by some accounts, beyond his passing. Grasping their beliefs and premises is essential for an understanding of Singapore's grand strategy.

The book heavily draws upon archival documents, speeches, interviews, and memoirs from the eras under examination. The book highlights five pivotal speeches from 1965 onward that capture the core of Singapore's grand strategy. These include Lee Kuan Yew's "Big and Small Fishes in Asian Waters" on June 15, 1966, Goh Keng Swee's "What Kind of War?" on November 19, 1971, S. Rajaratnam's "Singapore: Global

City" on February 6, 1972, as well as Lee Hsien Loong's "Security Options for Small States" on October 16, 1984, and "Choice and Conviction—The Foreign Policy of a Little Red Dot" on November 30, 2012.

Between the Introduction and Conclusion, the book encompasses five chapters, chronicling the evolution of Singapore's grand strategy from 1965 onwards. Notably, Lee Kuan Yew's tenure, spanning 1965 to 1990, is prominently featured in three of these chapters. The premiership of Goh Chok Tong (1990-2004) is detailed in Chapter 4, while Chapter 5 burrows into the era under Lee Hsien Loong, beginning in 2004.

The Introduction delves into the debates surrounding the concept of "grand strategy." The author adopts four distinct lenses to comprehend the concept: historical, theoretical, practical, and military. These paradigms align with the insights of historians, social scientists, policymakers, and military strategists. Furthermore, the book embraces Peter Feaver's definition of a state's 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 the state's national interest" (p. 9).

Chapter 1, covering the years 1965 to 1970, describes the policies adopted and the reasons behind them to guarantee Singapore's territorial security upon independence. The first and foremost policy involved managing relations with immediate neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia. In the wake of Singapore's split from Malaysia, the initial years of their bilateral relationship were fraught with tension. A nuanced approach was imperative in dealing with Malaysia, particularly as Singapore heavily depended on it for water. In 1963, while Singapore was still part of Malaysia, Indonesia declared a policy of Confrontation and

attacked various targets in Singapore. This policy ceased in 1966, a year after Singapore's independence. With improved ties between Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore solidified its diplomatic connection with Indonesia in 1967. Regarding defense, while Singapore leaned towards a non-alignment stance, it could not immediately dispense with British bases before establishing an "indigenous military" (p. 34), as Lee was fearful of a "possible attack" from Indonesia (p. 37).

Chapter 2 focuses on Singapore's strategic approach beyond its immediate neighbors in the early years of independence, especially its relations with China and the United States, and its attitude towards multilateralism. Singapore's perception of the United States during this period underwent a transformation. Initially, many Singaporean leaders felt that Washington, with its perceived "anti-Chinese" stance, saw Singapore as an "unreliable 'Third China'" (p. 57). However, Singapore "cannot afford to intimidate the US" and understood that "should the Americans withdraw from Southeast Asia, the Chinese will promptly fill the vacuum" and that "would be the end of their independence" (p. 59). In 1966, Singapore and the United States forged full diplomatic ties, ushering a new age in bilateral relations. The relationship was generally smooth, except under the Carter administration (1977-1981).

Singapore's perspective on China also evolved over this period. Initially, due to Beijing's advocacy of communism, Singapore regarded it with suspicion. Nevertheless, Singapore acknowledged China's strategic significance, given its enduring interest in Southeast Asia. While interactions between Singapore and China commenced in 1978, formal diplomatic ties were only established in 1990. Overall, the relationship between the two countries has been largely harmonious.

Given its stature as a small city-state, Singapore recognized the significance of multilateralism and was a vocal proponent of it. The

conclusion of Confrontation set the stage for the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. For Singapore, the initial focus of ASEAN should be on economic and social initiatives among its existing members. Only later should it contemplate expanding its membership and broadening the range of its dialogues. For Singapore, ASEAN was "a scheme for economic cooperation" and not military (p. 75).

Chapter 3 first offers an in-depth exploration of Singapore's defense strategy, emphasizing the concept of Total Defence introduced in 1984. As a "key component in Singapore's defense strategy" (p. 83), Total Defence is built on five pillars: military, civil, economic, social, and psychological. A united populace is essential for Total Defence to succeed. Thus, multiracialism is the domestic dimension of Singapore's grand strategy.

The chapter also provides an in-depth analysis of Singapore's response to Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia. Singapore adopted a very high profile on the issue because "Cambodia's problems could become Singapore's problems in the future" (p. 87). However, Singapore abstained from the 1975 United Nations General Assembly resolution regarding Indonesia's invasion of East Timor and did not criticize China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979. These reflected Singapore's approach of pragmatism in foreign relations.

Chapter 4 revisits the era of Goh Chok Tong's leadership from 1990 to 2004, shining a spotlight on the economic-security link of Singapore's strategy and exploring the city-state evolving dynamics with the United States, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. For the Singapore leadership, "without a strong economy, there can be no strong defense" (p. 101). Under the Goh administration, the concept of security became more comprehensive with a "whole-of-society

approach" (p. 126). Goh built on Lee's legacy by ensuring consistent economic growth, upholding internal unity, introducing fresh foreign policy endeavors, and broadening Singapore's economic and political influence.

Singapore benefited from not only its security partnership with the United States but also China's economic rise. Among Southeast Asian nations, Singapore has been the staunchest advocate for maintaining an American presence in the region. Following the Philippine Congress' 1991 decision to close American bases, Singapore extended an offer to the United States for a forward operating facility. Concurrently, Singapore forged robust ties with the Chinese leadership and actively contributed to China's economic progress. Concerning Malaysia and Indonesia, under Goh's leadership, Singapore continued to foster positive relations with both neighboring countries, while prioritizing building its military capabilities. A testament to this approach was the creation of the Indonesia–Malaysia–Singapore Growth Triangle.

Chapter 5 looks into Singapore's grand strategy under the leadership of Lee Hsien Loong, starting from 2004. The narrative continues to unravel Singapore's evolving dynamics in its relationships with important countries to its interests, including the United States, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, as well as its stance on multilateralism.

Lee Hsien Loong has termed the relationship between China and the United States as "the most important bilateral relationship for the world" (p. 130). While Singapore prefers not to take sides, it welcomes the U.S. presence in the region and has also been vocal in advocating for U.S. engagement with ASEAN. Singapore views China's ascent optimistically, anticipating advantages from its economic expansion. By 2014, the bond between Singapore and China expanded beyond just economic and cultural aspects to include stronger military ties. Yet, with

the intense competition between China and the United States, Singapore is navigating the intricate task of maintaining equilibrium between these two dominant forces.

Singapore sees Japan as a pivotal force in Asia, joining the United States and China in a "strategic triangle" that underpins regional stability (p. 135). Singapore wishes for Japan to increase its defense spending, allowing the United States to allocate resources elsewhere. Adjacent to China, India stands as another vast economy with the potential to provide a strategic counterweight benefiting Singapore's economic and security interests. Consequently, Singapore has championed India's active participation in the region. Australia, offering training zones for Singapore, holds views closely aligned with Singapore regarding regional dynamics and the United States' role. Under Lee Hsien Loong's leadership, relations with Malaysia and Indonesia have experienced challenges despite some advancements.

The book showcases several strengths. Its predominant use of archival evidence offers an unparalleled depth and credibility to its claims. The meticulous mining of records ensures that readers receive a narrative rooted in concrete historical facts, making the content both enlightening and trustworthy. Furthermore, the book's clear and methodical structure ensures easy navigation and comprehension. The combination of a well-organized layout, and rich archival references, delivers a comprehensive and insightful exploration of Singapore's strategic evolution.

While the book is undeniably insightful in its approach to Singapore's grand strategy, there are a few areas where readers might find themselves seeking more. First, a foundational understanding of Singapore's political system and its decision-making process would

have enriched the context, making the narrative more holistic. Such an introduction would have provided readers, especially those unfamiliar with Singapore's political landscape, a clearer backdrop against which to interpret the nation's grand strategy. Second, the author's heavy reliance on key speeches and interviews, while invaluable, could have been complemented by insights from official documents, like Singapore's National Security Strategy or National Defense Strategy. The incorporation of these sources would have added another layer of depth and rigor, presenting a more comprehensive view of the nation's strategic design and intentions.

Overall, the retrospective historical perspective makes the book relevant for a wide audience wanting to understand the foundations and evolution of Singapore's grand strategy. It will particularly appeal to scholars in history, international relations, Asian studies, and political science for research and academic discussions. Those shaping foreign policies, especially in Southeast Asia, would benefit from insights into Singapore's past strategic decisions. Additionally, analysts of global strategic trends in the Asia-Pacific would appreciate the depth on Singapore's strategic decisions. Given Singapore's prominence as a global business hub, professionals looking for socio-political context would also find the book insightful.

Note on the Reviewer

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