THE RISING ASIA ROUNDTABLE REVIEW

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

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Singapore's Grand Strategy has been Effective, but Can it Work Amidst Worsening U.S.-China Tensions?

Singapore's "Grand Strategy" is the theme of this book by Ang Cheng Guan, Professor of the International History of Southeast Asia at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The book defines "Singapore's Grand Strategy" as the Singapore government's effort to harness political, military, diplomatic, and economic tools to advance the national interest. The book focuses on Lion City's defense and foreign policies.

Put simply, the ultimate aim of Singapore's "Grand Strategy" is to enable this small nation of a few million people to survive and prosper in the face of bigger powers which were not always friendly. From 1963 to 1966, Indonesia had a low-level military conflict with its two neighbors, Malaysia and Singapore, in what is known as the Confrontation. After racial riots between Chinese and Malays in Singapore in 1964, the island was ejected from Malaysia and became

independent on August 9, 1965. At the time of its independence, Singapore had unfriendly relations with its two bigger neighbors, Indonesia and Malaysia.

"Fresh from separation, the first few years of Singapore-Malaysia relations were, not unexpectedly, difficult and prickly. Just a cursory reading of the newspapers, particularly in the early years, reveals the torrent of polemic, insults, vitriolic naming-calling and brinkmanship on both sides of the causeway," writes Ang (p. 23).

Kuala Lumpur would not allow Singaporean tanks or war planes to train in Malaysia, so the Singapore government sought to have Singapore armed formations train in Australia, says the book. When Singapore asked the Australian government for permission to use land in Australia for military exercises, Canberra was not forthcoming till the 1980s, the book adds (p. 49). At a press conference in Kuala Lumpur in July 1971, Australian Foreign Ministry Leslie Bury said Malaysia was "not altogether delighted but was reasonably reconciled" to Singapore troops training in Australia, the book recounts (Ibid.).

Apart from its neighbors, Singapore has had tricky relations with two superpowers, the United States and China, from its independence till now. Initially, relations between the United States and Singapore were marked by suspicion, partly because Washington perceived Singapore's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) as a left-wing government that might be sympathetic to Communist China.

At a press conference on August 31, 1965, days after Singapore's independence, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew publicly expressed anti-American views. Lee said if British military bases departed from Singapore, there would be no U.S. bases in his country, says the book (p. 58). But secretly, the Singapore government was shifting towards the United States. Soon after the press conference, George Bogaars,

Singapore's Permanent Secretary of Defence, asked U.S. officials to understand the motivation behind Lee's anti-U.S. diatribe which was to gain acceptance from the Afro-Asian club of nations, the book discloses (Ibid.). Bogaars said the Singapore government would not interfere with the U.S.-British arrangement of bringing South Vietnamese officers through Singapore for training at the Johore Jungle Warfare School in Malaysia (p. 59).

On March 26, 1966, Prime Minister Lee met U.S. Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, James D. Bello, in a spirit of letting bygones be bygones and to signal a new era in Singapore-U.S. relations, the book says (Ibid.). On April 4, 1966, the U.S. Consulate General in Singapore was elevated to an embassy. In a program, Meet the Press, of U.S. television station NBC on October 22, 1967, Lee said when China became prosperous, Singapore "will be much safer" (p. 64). In another U.S. TV interview in October 1967, Lee said having lost China to the Communists, the United States "have got to live with it" (Ibid.). China was run by a group of leaders who wanted their nation to be a great power, Lee added. "Why shouldn't they be great? You can't stop them" (Ibid.).

The book recounts that in 1967, Singapore minister Goh Keng Swee said, "The great problem that China poses and to which we in Asia have yet to find a solution is this. If, by the 1990s or in the early decades of the 21st century, the Communist system in China were to produce a modern industrial state equipped with all the technological advances, what will happen to the rest of Asia if it fails to achieve similar progress?" (p. 64).

The predictions of Lee and Goh, who were among the founding fathers of Singapore, turned out to be remarkably accurate. China has indeed become a great power which the United States fears as a military

and economic threat. China is now the world's second largest economy and the world's largest manufacturing nation. The accuracy of their predictions so many years ago attests to the visionary foresight of these founders of Singapore.

As the book relates, the prediction of Singapore's first foreign minister, S Rajaratnam, was likewise prescient. In 1971, Rajaratnam predicted that after the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek died, Taiwan would move in the direction of independence (p. 69). While Taiwan has not declared itself separate from China, calls for independence have been growing on the island in recent years.

Singapore maintained a delicate balancing act in its relations with China and Taiwan. Since 1965, Singapore had consistently voted against the U.S. resolution to keep China out of the United Nations (UN), according to the book. China joined the UN in 1971 when U.S. President Richard Nixon had a rapprochement with Beijing. Yet Lee Kuan Yew had a very good relationship with Taiwan Prime Minister and later President Chiang Ching-kuo, a son of Chiang Kai-shek. Singapore soldiers have been training in Taiwan since the 1970s.

As with China and Taiwan, Singapore has been managing a complex balancing act between China and the United States. Although Lee welcomed China's rise as early as the 1960s, he saw U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia as essential to Singapore's interests, the book relates (p. 59). When the Philippine Congress in 1991 voted to shut down the U.S. bases in the Philippines, Singapore offered to upgrade its naval base to service U.S. warships and serve as a transit point for U.S. naval operations in the region. The book cites Lee's interview with Asahi Shimbun in 2010 where Lee said, "Without America . . . you can't balance China" (p. 146).

The Singapore government has also taken a complicated approach to Vietnam and Cambodia, after Vietnam invaded Cambodia and displaced the murderous Khmer Rouge regime in December 1978. S.R. Nathan, the former Singapore official and president, said the Cambodian issue was central to Singapore's policy because the principle involved was that no foreign military intervention should be allowed to overthrow a legal regime, according to the book (p. 87). If this principle was violated, it would create a dangerous precedent, so Singapore could not compromise on that issue, Nathan explains. In a lecture in 2008, Nathan recalled how for a decade, Singapore along with other nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) opposed the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia (Ibid.).

S. Dhanabalan, who was Singapore Foreign Minister for most of the 1980s, described the Cambodian issue as the key issue for his ministry and "the centerpiece of ASEAN diplomacy" during the 1980s and early 1990s, says the book. "Many of Singapore's career ambassadors, such as Tommy Koh, Kishore Mahbubani and Tony Siddique, cut their teeth and learnt their trade during this period," Ang writes (pp. 87-88).The book quotes Singapore diplomat Barry Desker saying the Cambodian conflict was "the defining issue for a generation of Foreign Service officers and helped to build a strong esprit de corps" (p. 88).

To "teach Vietnam a lesson" for invading Cambodia, in the words of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, China attacked Vietnam on February 17, 1979. However, ASEAN countries had a problem coming to terms with the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, after strongly opposing the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the book quotes Nathan saying (p. 91). Luckily, Chinese troops withdrew from Vietnam one month later without

accomplishing their mission, which let ASEAN off the hook, Nathan adds.

In 1981, Mahbubani said Singapore "did not want Vietnam to be bled until it collapsed" and became a satellite of China, which would be even more disastrous for ASEAN, the book recounts (p. 91). Vietnamese forces withdrew from Cambodia in September 1989, paving the way for ASEAN to improve relations with Vietnam.

Singapore's opposition to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia stemmed from the small state's fear of being invaded by bigger countries. Singapore took the rule of law seriously as it believed small states cannot survive if interaction is governed by power alone where more powerful states swallow weaker states, says the book. Singapore has on occasion been criticized for being too legalistic in its interactions, but as S. Jayakumar, a former law professor and former foreign minister, says in book, "We should not be put off by such criticism of being legalistic" (p. 158).

Singapore's firm stance on legalistic principles go back to its early days of nationhood. During Confrontation on March 10, 1965, two Indonesian commandos bombed MacDonald House, a commercial building in Singapore, killing three people and injuring thirty-three others. In 1968, the Singapore authorities hung the two Indonesian commandos despite pleas for clemency from Indonesian President Suharto. In retaliation, on the day of the hanging, Indonesian rioters ransacked the Singapore embassy in Jakarta. The Indonesian government declared the two commandos heroes and buried them in Indonesia.

As the book relates, Nathan says the primary issue was "whether Singapore should knuckle down under to a larger neighbor or should uphold the law" (p. 31). Relations between Singapore and Indonesia

deteriorated shortly after the hanging. To repair ties, during Lee's first visit to Indonesia as Singapore Prime Minister on May 28, 1973, he reportedly scattered flowers on the graves of the two executed commandos in the Heroes' Cemetery in South Jakarta. This wise and generous act of Lee, a trained lawyer, shows Singapore could not rely on legalistic principles alone to get along with Asian countries.

Singapore learnt the rule of law from its British colonial masters, but the mindsets of many Asian cultures go beyond the Anglo-Saxon rule of law. Hard legalism goes against the grain of Indonesian culture, which has been infused with compromise, subtlety, balance, and soft skills under the influence of ancient India. As for China, its leaders do not like to lose face. If by standing on legal principles, Singaporean officials make Chinese leaders lose face, no amount of international law will prevent the Chinese leaders from resorting to a retaliatory stratagem against Singapore. This does not mean Singapore should let a superpower like China bully the tiny city state. Instead, Singaporean officials should privately voice their objections behind closed doors to Chinese leaders in a way that does not make the Chinese leaders lose face. If Singaporean leaders do that, Singapore will stand a greater chance of having its way with China.

So far, Singapore has survived and thrived as a major international financial hub with its Grand Strategy. This little nation's Grand Strategy has remained consistent since its independence, Ang writes.

Grand strategy changes when the international system changes, the book points out. Singapore's Grand Strategy has so far been successful, but whether the current U.S.-China rivalry will lead to a change remains to be seen, the book notes (p. 160).

From 2017, U.S.-China relations worsened considerably, putting Singapore in a tough spot. In 2017, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, a son of Lee Kuan Yew, was quoted in the 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" (Ibid.).

There are 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 Singapore's Grand Strategy amidst hostile relations between the United States and China.

It will require much skill and adroitness on the part of Singapore's future leaders to successfully navigate between two superpowers at odds with each other. To succeed in this respect, Singapore's leaders need to be flexible enough to modify their Grand Strategy if necessary and not rigidly stick to old formulas. Blind reliance on rule of law will not be enough, but the ability to intuitively read the present situation and accurately forecast the future will be needed.

This book uses a lot of informative material to advance its case. It contains interesting information from the archives of various countries. For example, it cites archival documents of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, revealing at least two major diplomatic exchanges to get Beijing to recognize Singapore as an independent nation (p. 66). The first was on August 18, 1965 when Ko Tek Kin, Singapore's High Commissioner to Malaysia, met a Chinese official, Qi Feng, in Hong Kong. The second was when Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye, Singapore Foreign Minister Rajaratnam, and Singapore Education Minister Ong Pang Boon met Chinese ambassador Wang Yutien in Kenya, and Chinese ambassador He Ying in Tanzania in September 1965. By June 1966, Beijing had turned towards the far left, while Singapore was shifting

towards the United States (p. 66) Hence, full diplomatic relations between Singapore and China were put off till October 1990.

This book is highly educational for anyone interested in the evolution of Singapore's defense and foreign policies.

Note on the Reviewer

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