



THE RISING ASIA ROUNDTABLE REVIEW

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

THE AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

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Singapore's Grand Strategy is Always Dynamic and is Not Cast in Stone

I am grateful to Harish Mehta for organizing this round table of my book and for his very well-written Introduction. I wish also to thank Toh Han Shih, Bich Tran and Manjeet S. Pardesi for taking time to read and review the book. It is evident from the reviews that they have all read the book very carefully, and for this I am most appreciative.

I am indeed heartened that all three reviewers liked the book. Toh Han Shih has very skillfully drawn out some of the significant and little-known episodes recounted in the book. I am glad that he found the book "highly educational for readers interested in the evolution of Singapore's defense and foreign policies" as one of my objectives for writing the book was to fill a gap in the literature of the post-1965 diplomatic, defence, and security history of Singapore.

Bich Tran (who is by training a political scientist) is very familiar with the grand strategy literature, having written a PhD thesis on Vietnam's Grand Strategy, appreciates and the historical approach which I have adopted to write this book. She offered two useful suggestions

(provide a “fundamental understanding of Singapore’s political system and its decision-making process; and to make more use of published official documents) which I would certainly take on board if there is an opportunity to publish a new edition of the book in future.

Turning to Manjeet Pardesi’s series of questions (which I am afraid I may not be able to answer satisfactorily), my view is that personalities (in Manjeet’s words, “far-sighted leaders”) matter. To cite an example, a different set of leaders might not have the gumption to take Singapore out of Malaysia given the obvious structural constraints. A different set of Malaysian leaders might also not have allowed the separation to proceed as smoothly as it did. Systemic (and geographical) factors inevitably/definitely matter but there is always room for agency. That said, even with “far-sighted leaders,” success is not a certainty. As Lee Kuan Yew professed, when he started his political life in the 1950s, he did not know he would be on the winning side of the Cold War and that Singapore would turn out to be a success—an implicit reminder of the role of contingency in the study of history.

This leads me to Manjeet’s next question—How much of Singapore’s grand strategic success is an outcome of the choices of others? I cited Jennifer Mitzen at the end of my book that “no state’s grand strategy can succeed in isolation; each requires a supportive international environment.” Perhaps I should have elaborated on this observation in the book. What happens when countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, China, India) play the “ethnic card”? My own view is that Singapore leaders should avoid tit-for-tat and refrain from playing the “ethnic card” for as long as possible. As noted in my book, one of the reasons for Singapore’s success and one of the key ingredients of Singapore’s Grand Strategy is its ability to maintain a cohesive multi-racial society despite having an ethnic Chinese majority. What happens

when push comes to shove would shift my narrative into the realm of counterfactual history, scenario-planning, or even speculation. For me as a historian, the principal task must be to try to understand why things happened as they did.

I would end here by repeating my favorite quote by Lee Kuan Yew which I cited at the end of the 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” (p. 160). Singapore’s Grand Strategy is, therefore, always dynamic and is not cast in stone.

I wish to once again express my deepest appreciation to Harish, Han Shih, Bich and Manjeet.