

The Big Ideas of Lee Kuan Yew

Exposición del embajador Bilahari Kausikan en la conferencia "The big ideas of Lee Kuan Yew", realizada en la Universidad Nacional de Singapur el 16 de septiembre de 2013.

There is something more than a little incongruous about tagging a conference »The Big Ideas of Mr Lee Kuan Yew«. The term '*big ideas*' generally connotes some overarching framework or theory. Yet he once told a journalist: »*I am not great on philosophy and theories. I am interested in them, but my life is not guided by philosophy or theories. I get things done*« This is particularly so with regard to his approach to geopolitics and international relations, an area to which more than a fair share of nonsense has been attached under the guise of theory. It is more appropriate to talk about Mr Lee's *approach* towards international relations and geopolitics.

An international relations theorist would no doubt call Mr Lee a realist. But no simplistic label can do justice to the eclectic complexity of his approach towards international relations and geopolitics. I suspect that if anyone were foolhardy enough to ask Mr Lee which of the main schools of international relations –realism, institutionalism, liberalism, constructivism– most influenced him, his reply, if he were in a good mood and if he had even heard of these theories, would be 'all of the above and none of the above'.

Mr Lee is above all an empiricist. He saw the world for what it is and never mistook his hopes or fears for reality. Mr Lee is not devoid of idealism. After all, he risked his life in the struggle against the communist United Front for ideals. Still he knew that in world affairs, as in all fields of human endeavour, not all desirable values are compatible or can be simultaneously realised.

I think Mr Lee would not, for example, disagree with the proposition that a world governed by international law and international organizations would be preferable for a small country like Singapore. But he would certainly question whether a world of sovereign states of vastly disparate power could really ever be such a world. He understood that international order is the prerequisite for international law and organization. So while you may work towards an ideal and must stand firm on basic principles, you settle for what is practical at any point of time, rather than embark on Quixotic quests.

Mr Lee's 'big idea' was Singapore. On that he always thought big: Singapore as we know it today would not otherwise exist. In so far as any central organizing principle infused his geopolitical thinking, it is a laser-like focus on Singapore's national interest. He saw the world canvas whole. But unlike too many self-styled 'statesmen', Mr Lee never succumbed to the temptation of capering about on the world stage for its own sake. When he expressed an opinion, it was always to some purpose, even though the purpose may not always have been immediately apparent to everyone. He looked at the world strategically with a broad and long term vision; he played chess not draughts.

His geopolitical thought is based on an unsentimental view of human nature and power; a view shaped by experience, particularly, as he on several occasions has said, his experience of the Japanese occupation. His analyses are characterized by the hard headed precision with which he zeroed in on the core of any situation, undistracted by the peripheral. He expressed his ideas directly without cant of any kind.

This is harder to do than you may think and consequently rare. Fluffy thought and weasely expression are more usual in diplomacy and the analysis of international relations. For proof of the scarcity of clear thinking on international issues, just peruse the op-ed and international news pages of any major newspaper with an objective eye. And consider, for example, the many knots western commentators and policy-makers have tied themselves into over Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt and now over Syria. Wishful, ideologically driven thinking,

loose talk and the advocacy of impossible or incompatible goals abounds.

The disciplined clarity of his thought and expression was one of the primary sources of the influence Mr Lee wielded, disproportionate for the leader of a small country like Singapore. His views were valued because they were unvarnished and gave a fresh and unique perspective. He said things that leaders of much larger and more powerful countries may well have thought and may have liked to say, but for one reason or another, could not themselves prudently say. And so he made Singapore relevant. His support for the Vietnam war at a time when it was politically unpopular -- a war he believed unwinnable but nevertheless vital to buy time for non-communist Southeast Asia to put its house in order -- being a case in point, as was his support for the US presence in East Asia long before it became fashionable in our neighbourhood.

Mr Lee once memorably said that he was interested in being correct rather than being politically correct. Naturally, he was not always correct. International developments are intrinsically unpredictable and nobody can ever be always correct. But he was more often than not on target and when he was not, was never too proud to change his position. So when he spoke even great powers listened. They may not always have liked what they heard, but they listened and more importantly, sometimes acted on what they heard. In his memoirs Mr Lee has recounted his 1978 meeting with Deng Xiaoping and how he got him to drop Chinese support for communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia. So let me tell you a less well known story.

In 1981, at the International Conference on Kampuchea held at the UN, the US was poised to sell out Singapore's and ASEAN's interests in favour of China's interest to see a return of the Khmer Rouge regime. The then Assistant Secretary of State in charge of China policy even threatened our Foreign Minister that there would be »*blood on the floor*« if we did not relent. We held firm. The next year, Mr Lee travelled to Washington DC and in a meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, described America's China policy as 'amateurish'. Word rapidly spread. As the young desk officer who took notes for that meeting, I was bemused by the

spectacle of the Assistant Secretary frantically scrambling to find out what exactly Mr Lee had said. I don't know if it was coincidental, but the very next year the Assistant Secretary in question was appointed Ambassador to Indonesia; an important position, but one in which he no longer held sway over China policy. And when his new appointment was announced, the gentleman anxiously enquired through an intermediary if Mr Lee had told then President Soeharto anything about him. He was reassured and served honourably in Indonesia.

I do not recount this incident in US-Singapore relations merely for the trite and possibly redundant purpose of illustrating Mr Lee's influence. The moral of the story is his approach to diplomacy; an approach which he hammered into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but which is not sufficiently understood by the general public or even some sections of our establishment. Diplomacy is not about being nice, polite or agreeable. It is more fundamentally about protecting and promoting the country's interests, preferably by being nice but if necessary by other appropriate means.

In 1968, Mr Lee turned down a direct appeal by former President Soeharto to pardon two Indonesian marines who had been sentenced to death for planting a bomb during *Konfrontasi* that killed several Singaporeans. He could not have done otherwise without conceding that the small must always defer to the big and irretrievably compromising our sovereignty. A Jakarta mob then sacked our Embassy and threatened to kill our Ambassador. But a few years later in 1973, he did not shy away from placing flowers on the graves of the two marines. Both actions -- standing firm on fundamental principle even at risk of conflict and making a gracious gesture once the principle had been established -- were equally important in setting the foundations of the relationship we today enjoy with Indonesia. He once told an Israeli general who had helped start the SAF that Singapore had learnt two things from Israel: how to be strong, and how *not* to use our strength; meaning that it was necessary to get along with neighbours and that no country can live in perpetual conflict with its neighbours.

But Mr Lee had no illusions about the challenges facing a Chinese majority Singapore permanently situated in a

Southeast Asia in which the Chinese are typically a less than fully welcome minority. His greatest mistake was perhaps, during the period when Singapore was part of Malaysia, to underestimate the lengths to which the Malaysian leadership would go to defend Malay dominance and privileges and led to what was politely termed '*Separation*'. But it turned out well for us, better in all probability than if we had remained in Malaysia. At any rate, it was not a mistake that he would ever make again.

The basic issue in Singapore's relations with our neighbours is existential: the implicit challenge a successful Chinese majority Singapore organized on the basis of multiracial meritocracy *by its very existence* poses to contiguous systems organized on different and irreconcilable principles. This is sometimes dismissed as 'historical baggage' that will fade with time. But it is really about the dynamic between two different types of political systems which once shared a common history but have since evolved in very different directions. It is not easy to envisage the fundamental differences ever fading away, even if time blunts their sharpest edges.

Still, even when differences were at their keenest, it did not prevent Mr Lee from working with Malaysia (and Indonesia) based on the pragmatic pursuit of common interests. It is no secret that the relationship between Mr Lee and Dr Mahathir the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, was often testy and fraught with history. Less well known is the fact that until the 2010 agreement on railway land, the most significant Singapore-Malaysia agreement since our independence was the 1990 Water Agreement concluded between Dr Mahathir and Mr Lee, then still Prime Minister. Among other things, it provided for the construction of Linggiu Dam.

The incongruity of Singapore in Southeast Asia is the central geopolitical reality from which flowed the constants in Mr Lee's approach towards geopolitics and key decisions. These include, among other things: the early investment in ASEAN as a stabilizing mechanism at a time when it was still uncertain whether ASEAN would survive; his emphasis on balance and the imperative of involving all major powers in regional affairs rather than acquiesce in '*regional solutions to regional problems*'; the necessity of anchoring the

US presence in Southeast Asia, including the offer of the use of our facilities after US forces were no longer welcome in Subic Bay and Clark Airbase in the Philippines; the decision to look forwards in relations with Japan and to forgive if not forget, despite his own bitter experiences during the Japanese occupation; never giving up on India despite his continuing scepticism about its governance; a non-ideological approach to working with the former Soviet Union whenever possible, despite his anti-communism; and the decision to be the last Southeast Asian country to establish formal diplomatic relations with China despite his early recognition of the inevitable growth of China's influence and the close personal relations he enjoyed with many Chinese leaders.

No leader, however personally brilliant an individual, can be internationally influential if he only leads a barren rock. Mr Lee was influential because Singapore is successful. The core operating principles Mr Lee established still form the basis of our foreign policy, although of course their application is continually adjusted to changing circumstances. This should not be surprising since we cannot choose our geopolitical situation and small countries have limited options. But the question inevitably arises: can we continue to be internationally effective and relevant in a post-Lee Kuan Yew era?

Many years ago, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned a study on how Singapore could continue to have a close relationship with China after Mr Lee's network of personal contacts with Chinese leaders was no longer available. I must emphasize that the study was not conducted by a Foreign Service Officer because after lengthy consideration, the conclusion was - have more Lee Kuan Yews!

This was not exactly very helpful. But I am not entirely pessimistic. Mr Lee relinquished executive authority more than twenty years ago; we have in effect already been in a post-Lee Kuan Yew era for quite some time. There will never be another Lee Kuan Yew. But we are still and can remain internationally relevant so long as Singapore is successful and we do not lose the habits of mind – supple, pragmatic, disciplined and unsentimental long-term thinking focused on the national interest – the core principles and the clarity of expression that Mr Lee instilled in what is today a far more

institutionalized foreign policy system. So long as we retain this edge, our views will continue to be sought by countries large and small, many of whom seek to emulate our policies.

It is however not to be taken for granted that we can in fact retain this edge. Domestic politics in Singapore is becoming more complicated. Foreign policy will sooner or later be the subject of domestic debates. This is not necessarily a bad thing provided -- and this is a crucial condition -- foreign policy debates occur within nationally agreed parameters of what is and is not possible or desirable for a small country. This is difficult under the best of circumstances and even more difficult for a country with only a very short shared history.

Already and all too often I see the irrelevant or the impossible being held up as worthy of emulation; I see our vulnerabilities being dismissed or downplayed; and I see only a superficial understanding of how the world really works in civil society and other groups who aspire to prescribe alternate foreign policies. Most dangerously of all, I see the first signs, as yet still faint but alas, unmistakable, of failure by some to resist the temptation to use foreign policy as a tool of partisan politics. Whatever the dissatisfaction with the government, however great the desire for change, Singaporeans should not lose sight of the old adage, somewhat clichéd but not invalid: domestic politics should stop at water's edge. Even the biggest and most powerful of countries disregards this to their cost and chagrin; for small countries disregard could prove fatal. Fortunately the situation is not yet irreversible.