

Reading of Essay by Contributor

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Singapore Diplomacy -- A view from the other side

I had the chance to work with a range of diplomats after I left my posting in Singapore because I returned to DC to serve as Undersecretary of Commerce. This allowed me to draw a few conclusions on how Singapore practices the craft.

Singapore's influence comes not from traditional attributes of power such as military might or economic weight, but from the power of ideas, the ability to advance those ideas, and the wisdom to avoid common mistakes of diplomacy. Diplomacy is a mixture of personalities, capabilities, politics, and interests. What rules of diplomacy does Singapore observe?

First, have a goal and have a view. Singapore thinks relentlessly about its policy objectives and what steps it needs to take to achieve them. Many other countries think more about process and internal bureaucratic obligations and do not actively pursue an agenda unless there is a crisis or emergency. Indeed, an embassy can spend its day just keeping even with its in-box, its phone log and its visitors, without ever advancing its goals. It's the gravitational pull of the pedestrian. Singapore has the discipline to minimize "busy work" and to keep focused on goals.

Second, present your points in a way that resonates with the other party. It was striking to me the frequency with which foreign governments would importune Washington by noting that a policy change was important to them. Singaporean diplomats would make the same point by noting how the policy change was important to the US.

Third, stylistically, Singapore diplomats were always well-prepared, collegial and purposeful. Meetings were efficient and cordial. Discussions always began with a recapitulation of common ground and moved to search for more.

Fourth, Singapore never served as a supplicant. It never sought money or favours. This ensured that the door would always be open and US leadership would view a discussion with Singapore leadership as a friendly meeting of peers and not a debate over the extent to which we should accede to a *demandeur*.

Fifth, no cheap shots, no public posturing against any country for expediency. Many countries use foreign policy to play to a domestic constituency. Singapore was always measured in its public comments and avoided catering to populist sentiment. Anti-Americanism has a persistent hold on certain political leaders, and when criticism is viewed as gratuitous it is more difficult to do business.

Sixth, Singapore brought additional value to meetings by being able to comment usefully on third countries and regional issues. Besides, how would it help Singapore to be under the eye of the US, anyhow? Let's talk about something more interesting.

Seventh, Singapore regularly sends senior-level delegations through DC. Mid-level US officials might not have a deep understanding of Singapore, but you can bet that in the lead-up to a PM's meeting with a President, the entire US Government apparatus gets busy. There is no better way to advance an agenda than to get on the President's schedule.

Eighth, Singapore actively works issues across the breadth of the US Government. You cannot wait by the phone and respond to emails. Make someone else respond to your emails.

Are there any problems or issues with Singapore diplomacy? I hesitate to offer criticism of a system which I view as top-performing, but let me highlight areas where gaps might not have allowed Singapore to reach its best.

For one, a high degree of centralization in Singapore can sometimes lead to insularity or rigidity. Singapore is a top-down polity. Sometimes you cannot be fully sure if you are engaging the system intellectually. Is the official meeting with you simply to relate a decision or is he really interested in your views? Can your interlocutor feed your ideas back into the Singapore system?

Second, in trying to find the balance between control, stability, and an open society, Singapore tends to tilt toward control. From the American point of view, openness is the better guarantee of stability, even if it can produce a noisier system.

We saw this difference in as the Suharto regime came to an end. Singapore tended to see Suharto as a friend in trouble, despite his faults - a bulwark against extremists. The US saw him as an autocrat unable to adjust to modern political requirements, whose efforts to stay in power would aid extremists. There is no doubt in my mind that Singapore, the US, and most importantly Indonesia are all better off for his departure.

Fortunately my tenure in Singapore saw a range of activities on which there was a high degree of convergence between Singapore and US: the Free Trade Agreement, the Strategic Framework Agreement, and the challenges of 9/11 including a security threat, and the challenges of SARS. So I had the opportunity to work closely with Singapore leadership and to see the Singapore system perform through bad weather and good.

And to the eight points delineated above, we can add a final point: that diplomacy must be underpinned by trust, signifying the relationship is not purely transactional. There is a human element that must be respected and a good diplomat will look for ways to find

that personal connection, to signal that there is value in working with the other party, even if there is no immediate benefit - what economists might call enlightened self-interest, what most people might call simply being helpful.

Sometimes it is the small gesture that makes this point.

When Prime Minister Goh hosted President Bush at the Istana, Mrs Goh held a lovely meal for First Lady Laura Bush at the Botanic Gardens. Both events went very well, as one would expect, and they allowed for national leadership to deepen personal bonds. But in the desire to show the First Lady the floral beauty of Singapore, there was a slight glitch. It seems that in addition to Mrs Goh and Mrs Bush being attracted to the tropical flowers, so was a honeybee. And Mrs Bush was stung by the bee. The meal froze as all eyes turned to the First Lady. Was this a diplomatic disaster in the making? Mrs. Bush laughed. "It's nothing. Happens in Texas all the time. Let's enjoy this marvellous meal." The buoyant mood returned, the conversation regained momentum, and the guests tucked into the lunch. Mrs Bush mentioned the incident to no one. What purpose would be served?

At that moment of the bee sting, the First Lady won my heart. And taught me another lesson about diplomacy.