

Point of view: To stay relevant, Singapore has to be extraordinarily successful

A small state like Singapore cannot be only "ordinarily successful. "To be relevant, we have to be extraordinary" and it is a strategic imperative, says Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan in a commentary published in the Jan 27 edition of TODAY.

Bilahari Kausikan

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SINGAPORE: In a speech at the Institute of Policy Studies' annual Singapore Perspectives conference on Monday (Jan 26), Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Ambassador-at-Large and former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explained why being a small country in South-east Asia is not as simple as it sounds for Singapore.

Mr Kausikan's full speech is below:

What does "sovereignty" mean to a small country such as Singapore? We did not seek independence, but had independence thrust upon us. I have been told that Mr Lee Kuan Yew once said "small island states are a political joke".

I cannot trace the source of that quote and if anyone can help I would be very grateful. But even if apocryphal, it implies a concept of sovereignty based on which our founding fathers sought independence within Malaysia rather than alone.

I suspect it was difficult for that generation to even conceive of Singapore apart from what was then called Malaya. Obviously, and thankfully, that concept of sovereignty proved mistaken or was rendered mistaken by the Herculean efforts of our pioneer generation.

The concept of sovereignty is constantly evolving. Rather than try to define the elephant, I propose to take its existence for granted and instead consider what sovereignty means to Singapore by deconstructing a single sentence: "Singapore is a small state located in South-east Asia."

This seems straightforward, but is it really? What do we mean by "small"? We are, of course, a physically small country. A moderately athletic person could without too much difficulty walk across it in a day. But as a trading centre, as a logistics hub, as a port and airport and as a financial centre we are far from "small". In trade, connectivity and finance, among others, we loom quite large internationally, far larger than our physical size may lead one to expect.

Sir Stamford Raffles established modern Singapore as a trading centre in 1819. Some recent archaeological studies suggest we may have been a significant trading centre since the 14th century, even before the concept of sovereignty in its current form existed.

Trade requires connectivity, logistics and finance. Of course, we today perform these functions at a far higher level of sophistication and complexity than in the past. But the point is that they are essentially similar functions and we have performed them as a British colony, as part of

Malaysia and only in the past 50 years — which is but the blink of an eyelid in the sweep of history — as a sovereign and independent country.

There is, therefore, no reason to assume that sovereignty and independence are necessary conditions for us to perform such functions. We could conceivably do so even if our independence and sovereignty comes, by some blunder of policy, accident of politics or malicious whim of the gods, to be severely compromised.

Size Matters

Size — physical size — matters and small states are intrinsically irrelevant to the workings of the international system. It is impossible to conceive of a world without large countries such as the United States, China, India, Indonesia, Brazil or Russia, or even without medium-sized states such as Australia, Japan, France or Germany.

But the world will probably get along fine without Singapore as a sovereign and independent country. After all, it has only had to put up with us for 50 years. For small states, relevance is not something to be taken for granted, but an artefact — created by human endeavour, and having been created, preserved by human endeavour. The creation and maintenance of relevance must be the over-arching strategic objective of small states.

The majority of states are small. Slightly more than two decades ago, Singapore established the Forum of Small States (FOSS) at the United Nations; “small” being somewhat arbitrarily defined as having a population of 10 million or less. It now has 105 members out of a total UN membership of 193 states. The international relevance of many members of FOSS is defined primarily by their vote in the UN. A vote in the UN is only that; not to be sneezed at, but still only one vote. Singapore is exceptional as a small country in that our international identity and relevance is something more than only our UN vote. We have options beyond our single UN vote and that is why we were able to establish FOSS in the first place.

How do we create relevance? There is no magic formula. What makes us relevant vis-a-vis country A may be irrelevant vis-a-vis country B and, in any case, may become irrelevant to both A and B as well as C in a week or a month or a year or a decade. What is relevant will eventually become irrelevant and must therefore be continually refreshed.

The world is constantly changing and since the world will not change to suit our conveniences, we will have to constantly adapt to it. Since the future is unknowable, adaptation requires nimbleness of thought and action; and thought and action based on a clinical — some say cold-blooded — understanding of the world as it is and not as we think it ought to be. Even if we hope to change the world we must first understand it as it is because hope, however fervent, is never enough.

The bedrock of relevance is success. I have always told our foreign service officers that if Singapore’s foreign policy has been successful, it is not because of their good looks, natural charm or the genius of their intellect; the most brilliant idea of a small country can be safely disregarded if inconvenient, whereas the stupidest idea of a large country must be taken seriously. In fact, the stupider the idea the more seriously it must be taken because of the harm

a large country can do. If we succeed, it is only because Singapore as a country is successful. Singapore's success invests our ideas and actions with credibility.

Success must be defined first of all in economic terms. Will a barren rock ever be taken seriously? I know that it has become fashionable in certain circles to claim that economic success is not everything and that there are other worthy goals in life. I do not disagree as far as individuals are concerned. If any of our compatriots chooses to drop out of the rat race and devote his or her life to art or music or religion or even to just lepak (relax) in one corner, I respect their choice and wish them well.

But the country as a whole does not have this luxury. A world of sovereign states is in fact a rat race, and often a vicious one, in which the weak go to the wall. There can be no opting out for a sovereign state. And to be crass about it, small countries will always have fewer options than large countries, but rich small countries have more options than poor small countries and that tilts the scales in our favour.

This is crucial because a small state cannot be only ordinarily successful. If we were no different from our neighbourhood, why should anyone want to deal with us rather than our larger neighbours who, moreover, are well endowed with natural resources? To be relevant, we have to be extraordinary. Being extraordinary is a strategic imperative.

Location Matters

And that brings me to the second part of the sentence with which I began. Singapore is not just a small country, but a small country in South-east Asia; not the South Pacific or South America or Europe or, thankfully, the Middle East. This seems obvious, but I think is nevertheless insufficiently appreciated, even by those who ought to know better.

A year or so ago, I was flabbergasted and disturbed when asked — asked in all seriousness and not only to take the mickey out of me, which would have been acceptable — by a Singaporean PhD candidate in political science, why Singapore could not pursue a foreign policy akin to that of Denmark or Switzerland. The question aroused all my prejudices about the academic study of international relations. It makes a vast, and I thought, glaringly obvious difference where a country is situated. That a Singaporean PhD candidate, who presumably knew something about her own country as well as the subject she was studying, could ask such a question made me worry about the future of our country.

South-east Asia is not a natural region, by which I mean a region that can be defined by something intrinsic to itself, as, for example, Europe can be defined as heir to Christendom and the Roman Empire. The main characteristic of South-east Asia is diversity, which is another way of saying that there is nothing intrinsic to it.

There are obvious differences of political form and levels of economic development. But the most important diversities of South-east Asia are visceral: Diversities of race, language and religion. These are the roots of political tensions within and between the countries of South-east Asia.

The Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) was intended, among other things, to mitigate these diversities to ensure a modicum of order and civility in inter-state relationships in a region where this was not to be taken for granted. ASEAN has been reasonably successful. But ASEAN can never entirely erase these primordial diversities because race, language and religion are the essence of core identities.

What Makes Singapore, Singapore?

Singapore defines itself as a multiracial meritocracy and we organise ourselves on the basis of these principles. We are not perfect — there is no perfection to be found this side of heaven — but we take these principles seriously. They are what make Singapore Singapore. They also make us extraordinary because our neighbours organise themselves on the basis of very different principles.

This is most obvious in the case of Malaysia. It was the irreconcilable contradiction between fundamentally different political philosophies that made it impossible for us to remain in Malaysia and, no matter how closely we cooperate — and despite occasional spats, we do cooperate very closely in many areas — will make it impossible for us to ever be part of Malaysia again unless Malaysia abandons its basic organising principle. And if you believe that will happen, there is a bridge I can let you have really cheap.

The essential issue is existential; not what we do, but what we are: A Chinese-majority country with neighbours whose own Chinese populations are typically a less-than-fully-welcome minority and whose attitudes towards their own Chinese populations are too often projected upon us.

A Chinese-majority multiracial meritocracy that has been extraordinarily successful compared with its neighbours is often taken as an implicit criticism of differently-organised systems. That we are a tiny speck on the map and have hardly any history to speak of is an additional affront.

The intensity of such attitudes waxes and wanes; it manifests itself in different ways, at different times. But it never disappears, because it is the structural consequence of the dynamic between two types of systems. Being extraordinary does not make us loved, but it is the price we must pay for survival and autonomy.

In different forms and various degrees, such attitudes exist throughout South-east Asia, and in China, Japan and even in Western countries such as Australia and the US. Examples spring to mind all too readily, but diplomatic prudence does not permit me to elaborate.

Of course, none of this is intended to imply that we cannot work with our neighbours or any other country; obviously we must, obviously we can and obviously we do and indeed, I dare say, we do so quite well. But these complexities are never going to go away and we ignore or deny them only at peril of compromising our autonomy, that is to say, our sovereignty.

I believe that matters are going to get even more complicated because the external environment and our domestic environment are both changing, and external and internal complexities will act and react with each other in ways that cannot now be predicted.

There are already signs of foreign policy being used for partisan political purposes. This is probably inevitable. Domestic debates over foreign policy are not necessarily a bad thing provided they take place within parameters defined by shared assumptions. Otherwise, it is playing with fire. At the very least, it degrades the nimbleness of our responses if we have to argue everything out anew from first principles.

More Critical Thinking Needed

Shared assumptions come naturally, almost unconsciously, to countries with long histories. But with only 50 years of shared history, I am not entirely confident that this is the case in Singapore. There is something of an intellectual vacuum that is being largely filled by nonsense.

We need to be better at educating ourselves about our own history. We do not, in my opinion, do a good enough job and the recent debates about our own political history are, unfortunately, notable only for their utter vacuity.

What passes for critical thinking about our history is too often simply crying white if the establishment should say black. And social media exacerbates the situation by conflating information with opinion and treating both as entertainment.

As our domestic political environment becomes more complex with not only traditional political parties, but civil society organisations and advocacy groups contending in the policy space, opportunities for external influence will multiply.

Since the beginning of recorded history, states have always tried to influence each other, sometimes by covert means, but also legitimately and openly through diplomacy. The lines are not always clear and likely to get even more blurred. The enthusiasms of some, mainly Western, diplomats to whip the heathen along the path of righteousness have already occasionally led them to cross the boundaries of legitimate diplomatic activity.

More fundamentally, market forces are creating economic spaces that transcend national boundaries, most notably between China and South-east Asia. This is to be welcomed on economic grounds, but will have political and strategic consequences. It is redefining Westphalian notions of “state” and interstate relations and is stressing ASEAN as powerful centrifugal forces pull members in different directions.

As the only Chinese-majority country in South-east Asia, it could pose special challenges for Singapore. Already, Chinese diplomats and officials too often refer to Singapore as a “Chinese country”. We politely, but firmly, tell them that they are mistaken. And we will continue to do so. But the implications are worth pondering.