

A 'happy mistake': Bilahari Kausikan on Singapore's biggest foreign policy blunder

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The decision to join Malaysia in 1963 and subsequent split in 1965 shaped Singapore's future

The most important foreign policy decision we have ever taken was to join Malaysia. It was also the most serious foreign policy miscalculation we have ever made. In that apparent paradox lies the genesis of independent Singapore politics.

Speaking in the Singapore Legislative Assembly on March 5, 1957, Lee Kuan Yew said: "In the context of the second half of the 20th century South-east Asia, island nations are a political joke."

Mr Lee made the statement during a debate on the Constitutional Talks in London. It reflected his conviction that merger with Malaya was the only practical way forward if Singapore was to completely shake off colonial rule.

The political contests of the 1950s and early 1960s that led to merger and separation were intertwined with the struggle between left and right within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-backed United Front, and with the contest against Chinese and Malay chauvinists, in the context of broader global processes of decolonisation and the Cold War.

Those experiences shaped our independent political history.

To understand Singapore politics, we should juxtapose Mr Lee's 1957 statement with other statements by him and other first-generation leaders describing their experiences in these tangled and incredibly complex processes.

Speaking to Dennis Bloodworth about the PAP's struggles in the CCP-supported United Front, Mr Lee said: "Some mug had to do it."

Dr Goh Keng Swee echoed the sentiment: "There was really no choice... It was an act of reckless folly... We were five foolish young men and we walked right into it."

The 1957 statement was deterministic; the subsequent statements quoted by Bloodworth stressed agency and choice, cloaked in self-deprecating irony. As Mr Lee, as again quoted by Bloodworth, explained: "We wanted the British out... we believed nationalism to be a more potent force than communism, we pressed on regardless of the horrendous risks."

Our first-generation leaders were practitioners not theoreticians. But they must have known Thucydides' too-often quoted dictum: The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.

As practitioners, they must have regarded it as, at best, only partially true. Thucydides represents crude realism. Our first-generation leaders were realists, but not crude realists. They understood that crude realism is sometimes not very realistic. There is always agency. Fatalism is fatal. Were it not so, Singapore as we know it today would not exist. Too often,

crude realism is just an alibi for unwillingness to take risks, that is to say, to act. There is no action without risk.

Of course, not all risks work out. We all know what happened after merger. What made it impossible for us to remain in Malaysia ultimately amounted to a point of political philosophy. In the terminology of the day: Was it to be a "Malaysian Malaysia" or a "Malay Malaysia"?

Our first-generation leadership perhaps underestimated the vehemence with which the Malay leadership in Malaysia clung to the notion of "Ketuanan Melayu" - Malay dominance.

Consequently, they underestimated the extent to which their vision of a Malaysian Malaysia - based on the values we now call multiracial meritocracy - was unacceptable to the Malaysian Malay leadership. The fundamental incompatibility of these concepts is still the basic driving force underlying bilateral relations with Malaysia and, in a slightly different way, Indonesia too.

It was not a mistake that they would ever make again. Nor should we make the same mistake. But in retrospect, I think it was a happy mistake.

Would we have been better off if we had abandoned or fundamentally compromised basic principles in order to remain within Malaysia?

Looking at our neighbour today, it is difficult to come to that conclusion.

The challenges of those early years were nevertheless very serious, indeed existential.

In a book published in 1972 - seven years after we were forced out of Malaysia - a British academic predicted "the future of the city-state of Singapore will be largely determined by events in the surrounding 'countryside' of the Malay world, and the Republic can do little more than wait" and "the lines of domestic conflict have already been drawn... Singapore's tragedy is not merely that insurrection will occur in the near future, but that if and when it does occur, it will threaten the very survival of Singapore in South-east Asia".

Needless to say, none of this happened. In truth, however, it was often a close-run thing. As Janadas Devan once wrote somewhere, if we made no irretrievable errors, there was certainly a whole lot of trial.

But what that British academic did not understand is how seriously we took multiracial meritocracy. Having risked an unexpectedly independent Singapore becoming a "political joke" over this value, we had to make the value work. We certainly did not, as that British academic predicted, "do little more than wait".

And so, we are still here.

The Singapore story is the story of the government and people refusing to meekly await their fate, but instead defiantly exercising the agency that is never entirely absent even in the most daunting of circumstances, to ensure that the values for which we risked everything would succeed. That imperative shaped our politics and society.

The key point is that there is always agency.

Politics, whether of the domestic or foreign variety, is about using the agency that is never entirely absent even in the most dire of circumstances, to preserve, defend and advance the essential values on which our society is based and which is our unique value proposition.

We cannot be just like everybody else. If a small country is just like every other country, it risks becoming irrelevant; a political joke.

I think we have entered an era in which our unique method of organising politics and society - and it is unique because in that enormous region we now call the Indo-Pacific and beyond, every other country without exception organises politics and society on the basis of a formal or informal ethnic or religious hierarchy - is going to be assailed by an array of powerful global forces that will seriously test our unique value proposition.

Technologies of various kinds are forcing disruptive changes at a historically unprecedented pace. This is weakening the sense of national cohesion on which all politics must be based.

Powerful centrifugal forces have been set in motion. This has caused transnational and subnational identities of various kinds to be aggressively asserted everywhere. All this is occurring at a time when geopolitics is in a more than usual state of flux, and some major powers do not hesitate to try to harness identities for their own ends.

I see no reason why Singapore should somehow be magically exempted from these global trends.

Identity politics is already upon us, although usually not overtly labelled identity politics.

For example, lurking within debates about the role of foreigners in our economy is really a claim of hierarchy based on a different set of values and such claims are far too often not uncontaminated - much as those who make these claims may deny it - by claims of ethnic privilege. That is only one example. A moment's thought will bring others to mind. We are going to hear much more about all these issues when the next general election gets under way.

At the same time, I sense that, perhaps unsettled by the vast, impersonal, and only dimly comprehended, global forces that are swirling around us, some Singaporeans feel deeply insecure in the face of a future that can only be glimpsed as through a glass, darkly. I hope I am wrong, but that is what I sense. This could make us vulnerable to external and internal snake-oil salesmen peddling simplistic solutions.

How do we deal with this? The essential problems are enhanced 21st century iterations of issues we have faced down before. We were able to do so because our first-generation leaders were a rare mixture of political skill and technocratic competence.

That is why Singapore succeeded when so many other countries that gained independence around the same time, floundered in the face of similar challenges. As Singapore prospered, politics receded.

But we are now entering a period - and I think it will be a lengthy period - when leadership will again require a melding of political skill and technocratic competence. The lessons of our early political history are more relevant than ever and need to be reemphasised.

This is the text of a speech delivered by retired diplomat Bilahari Kausikan at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2020 conference on Monday, Jan 20.