

In an ambiguous world, can Singapore cope?

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Ambassador-at-large Bilahari Kausikan, the Institute of Policy Studies' 2015/16 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore, addresses this question in his fifth and final lecture. Below is an edited excerpt of his speech which he delivered on Wednesday.

Small states are vulnerable. The margin for error is narrow. The government's role is essential. Thanks to what was achieved over the last 50 years, the threat is no longer that we will disappear as a sovereign and independent country, although that can never be entirely discounted. The threat is now more insidious. The danger is that our autonomy could be compromised even though we remain formally independent and sovereign. We will still have a flag and a seat in the United Nations. No one will stop us from singing *Majulah Singapura*. But if we are clumsy in our external relationships or mishandle our domestic politics, the freedom to decide our own destiny could be severely circumscribed. That is in fact the condition of many small states who are members of the UN.

Small city-states have no intrinsic relevance to the workings of the international system. Relevance is an artefact created by human endeavour and, having been created, must be maintained by human endeavour. The world will probably get along fine without a fully sovereign and independent Singapore. We perform no function that we did not in some way serve as a British colony and as part of Malaysia. Autonomy has enabled us to raise the level at which we perform such functions and prosper. But there is little reason to assume that we cannot in some way serve these functions even if we were under someone's thumb. It need not be only the panda's paw or eagle's claw to which we may succumb.

We are an anomaly in South-east Asia. Singapore is a Chinese-majority state in a region where, typically, the Chinese are a less than entirely welcome minority. We organise ourselves on the basis of multiracial meritocracy in a region where other countries, explicitly or implicitly, typically organise themselves on the basis of the dominance of one ethnic group or another.

This confronts us with a paradox: An anomaly can only remain relevant, survive and prosper by continuing to be an outlier. We cannot be just like our neighbours. We cannot be only just as successful as our neighbours. If we were only just like them, why deal with us rather than bigger and more richly endowed countries? To be relevant, we have to be extraordinarily successful. But this does not endear us to our neighbours.

The basic issue in our relations with our immediate neighbours, and in varying degrees with other countries in South-east Asia, is not what we do but what we are: the implicit challenge that, by its very existence, a Chinese-majority Singapore, organised on the basis of multiracial meritocracy, poses to systems organised on the basis of different and ultimately irreconcilable principles. That we have the temerity to be more successful adds to the offence. But we have no other choice.

Singapore is an anomaly in that it is a Chinese-majority state in a region where, typically, the Chinese are a less than entirely welcome minority. Singaporeans organise themselves on the basis of multiracial meritocracy in a region where other

countries do so on the basis of the dominance of one ethnic group or another.

No one who is even minimally familiar with our neighbours should have any illusions that they mean to surpass us and put us in what they consider to be our proper place, which is not, believe me, where the sun shines on first. This attitude was virulently explicit when Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) was prime minister of Malaysia but muted under Prime Minister Najib (Razak). Indonesia makes no secret of it, even though President Jokowi (Joko Widodo) is not hostile to us. It is never absent even when relations are at their friendliest, not because they necessarily hate us, but to validate their own systems.

This does not mean we cannot cooperate with our neighbours. We must, we can and we do. But we must do so from a position of strength. Strength is not to be defined in purely military terms. The Singapore Armed Forces is, of course, vitally important. But strength, success and relevance must first of all be defined in economic terms. To put it crassly, small countries will always have fewer options and operate on narrower margins than big countries, but rich small countries will have more options than poor small countries.

DELICATE BALANCING ACT

The management of the paradox I set out a moment ago lies at the heart of our foreign policy. It prescribes our most fundamental approaches: maintaining an omnidirectional balance in South-east Asia by facilitating the engagement of all major powers in our region, while fostering regional cooperation through Asean; maintaining our economic edge and keeping our powder dry. It is a delicate balancing act.

What could make us trip and fall? To adapt a phrase from the great American folk philosopher, Pogo: I have met the enemy and he is us.

I am quoting from a comic strip by the late Walt Kelly. But my point is a serious one. We can cope with the more complicated post-Cold War external environment provided we get our internal environment right. A successful foreign policy must always and everywhere rest on a sound domestic foundation. There are three aspects: politics, policy and social cohesion.

Ideally, politics should stop at the water's edge. This is an ideal realised nowhere on earth. It is therefore not surprising that in Singapore, partisan politics has begun to creep into foreign policy. Political debate over foreign policy is not necessarily a bad thing if it is conducted within, and leads to a domestic consensus on, the parameters of what is possible and not possible for a small city-state in South-east Asia.

In countries with long histories, partisan debates over foreign policy are generally conducted within such a framework of shared assumptions, often unconscious, on what ought to be in the fundamental interests of the country irrespective of which party holds power. With only 50 years of history, I am not sure we have a framework of shared assumptions about the national interest in Singapore. Perhaps we will develop one in time. But so far, the manner in which the opposition has approached foreign policy does not inspire confidence that they have any concept of the fundamental national interest - that should hold irrespective of partisan ambition - or that they really understand Singapore's place in our region and the world.

We live in a region that is going to become more uncertain. One of my previous lectures analysed the strengths and limitations of Asean. Regional cooperation is not

a substitute for a strong defence; it is the stability in relationships created by a credible deterrent force that makes regional cooperation possible.

As our population ages, we will certainly need to devote more of our Budget to healthcare and other social spending. The Government has predicted that by FY2020, healthcare spending alone will outstrip defence spending. How is this to be financed? Obviously we will need to continue to grow to afford more social spending. We cannot live on our reserves indefinitely. But how are we going to grow in order to afford more social spending? A city-state with a small domestic market has no other economic choice but to be open to the world. Openness could well accentuate our vulnerabilities. All the more reason why the insurance policy of a strong deterrent is vital. If a strong deterrent can be maintained at lower cost, well and good. But would we be a desirable economic partner or an attractive investment destination if we could not defend ourselves?

WHAT AILS THE CIVIL SERVICE

This brings me to policy and the role of the civil service. The traditional role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of every country is to be the principal interlocutor of the country with the world. This concept of diplomacy is obsolete.

No MFA anywhere can now be the sole or even the main interlocutor of a country with the world. Of course, there are some things that only MFAs can do. But after the Cold War, the distinction that used to be made in international relations between "high politics" and "low politics" is blurring. Any MFA that tries to be a country's main interlocutor with the world is bound to fail its country: it can only pursue defensive interests - essentially just say "no" - because it will lack the domain knowledge to advance positive interests across the broad range of often highly technical issues that are now prominent on the international agenda, many of which span traditional bureaucratic boundaries.

This is confronting civil services across the world with unfamiliar challenges. All domestic agencies now have to engage internationally. There is no important policy domain that is now entirely "domestic". The only question is the degree to which an issue is "international". Within a country's civil service, agencies are being compelled to work with each other in new ways. This requires not just new structures and processes; that is the easy part. More crucially, it requires them to learn new ways of thinking and acting. This is difficult. Inertia is not a force to be underestimated in all bureaucracies. Any experienced civil servant anywhere can readily find reasons why something new should not be done, and as effortlessly find ways of presenting existing practice as new.

How does Singapore do? There is room for improvement.

A more uncertain external environment and the strategic imperative of avoiding being forced to make invidious choices or foreclose options in the midst of heightened US-China competition, places a premium on what have always been imperatives for the foreign policy of a small city-state: alertness, agility and an appreciation of nuance. But there are certain features of the way in which our civil service is currently organised that may have begun to degrade these qualities at a time when they are becoming even more important. I am not referring to big decisions taken deliberately by our political leadership as foreign policy decisions or to decisions taken with consciousness of their external implications. Here, I think our current structures and processes do quite well.

The challenge is more subtle. I am concerned about the accumulation of many small decisions perhaps with no obvious foreign policy implications, taken by different parts of the civil service for sound institutional reasons, but the cumulative effect of which may one day place us in an external position we do not want or intend to be.

Although the civil service now stresses a "whole of government" approach, it is my impression that - left to their own devices - agencies tend to take a more narrowly transactional approach in their institutional interests and hence in some ways operate more in institutional silos today than when I joined the civil service.

This degrades nimbleness, narrows vision and is making us risk-averse. It is always safer to remain within institutional boundaries.

At the apex of our civil service is the Administrative Service. This is based on the idea that senior public service leaders should be generalists, capable of taking on a range of appointments in different domains. Most senior appointments in the ministries and statutory boards are filled by Administrative Service officers rather than officers from specialist services. In my view, very few people can be equally good at everything. I, for example, would have been utterly useless in any other ministry than MFA.

The idea that generalists make the best senior public service leaders is based on a prior, perhaps largely unconscious, assumption: that there is only one type of logic that is valid across all domains. This is an assumption that leads to mistakes in domestic policy and is particularly antithetical to the requirements of a successful foreign policy.

A world of sovereign states is a world of different and competing logics because, in principle, a sovereign recognises no authority except its own. I do not want to push the point too far. In practice, states hold many basic assumptions in common. Otherwise, international relations as we know it would not be possible. But this still leaves a lot of space for what I termed the "Rashomon phenomenon" to operate within the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of possibilities that is the world of foreign policy. This is not a world that the Administrative Service generally finds congenial because control of events is not in its hands. But every ministry must now, at least to some degree, be responsible for conducting diplomacy.

In a world of competing logics, it is the function of diplomacy to reconcile logics or at least minimise friction between different logics, or when logics are irreconcilable, to ensure that your logic prevails. This requires first to recognise and accept that there are other valid logics than one's own. Every successful diplomat from any country I have met has one quality in common: empathy. By empathy I do not mean warm and fuzzy feelings but the ability to see the world through another's eyes and think as he does, the better to persuade him or out-manoeuvre him. This is not something that comes naturally to many Singapore civil servants.

I do not want to leave you with the impression that all is lost. All is not lost. Our elected leaders understand that policies that are not or cannot be communicated in political logic - that is to say a logic that will appeal to and can be understood by the intended audience - are policies that will fail. Political communication is improving. I am less confident, however, that this has yet been adequately hoisted in by all senior civil servants.

Still, where politicians go, the civil service must eventually follow. The idea that the civil service is or ought to be politically neutral or independent is a myth. A "politically

neutral" or independent civil service is to be found nowhere on earth. This is for the simple reason that the civil service is always and everywhere the instrument of the government in power. The civil service has a responsibility to give its political masters objective advice. But that is not the same thing as being "politically neutral". The civil service is obliged to carry out the instructions of the government, irrespective of whether those instructions are in accordance with its advice.

I find it remarkable that so many people, even some civil servants, do not seem to understand the relationship of the civil service to the government. Perhaps they do not want to understand.

But ours is a pragmatic system that changes when it must. In 2013, a new programme was introduced that enabled members of specialist services to be appointed to senior positions hitherto reserved for members of the Administrative Service. This was, in effect, an admission that the assumption that there is only one sort of logic valid across all domains is wrong. It was a good first step. What is not clear to me is whether individuals chosen to take up senior positions under the new programme must leave their own services and join the Administrative Service in order to do so, or if allowed to remain in their own services, be remunerated on a par with Administrative Service officers holding similar appointments. Unless this is so, a caste may be perpetuated.

I am not pessimistic about Singapore's ability to cope with the complexities ahead of us. We have coped with far worse with far less on our side. We will cope if we continue to be clinical in our understanding of our own situation and hard-headed about what may need to be done. We will fail only if we lose our sense of vulnerability because that is what keeps us united, agile and alert.