

Singapore, the accidental nation

This is an edited excerpt from a speech by former head of civil service Lim Siong Guan at the IPS-Nathan Lecture on Tuesday. He will deliver three lectures on the theme "Can Singapore Fall". In this excerpt from his first lecture, he highlights lessons for Singapore from Greek history that can be distilled into the maxim: Don't be weak.

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The Melian Dialogue

The Peloponnesian War was a war fought between Athens, leading the Peloponnesian League, and Sparta, leading the Delian League. It stretched from 431BC to 404BC, and included what has come to be known as the famous Siege of Melos.

Melos is an island in the Aegean Sea more than 100km to the east of mainland Greece. It was a prosperous island. The Melians were of the same ethnic group as the Spartans, but they chose to remain neutral in the war. Athens invaded Melos and asked Melos to pay tribute to Athens. The Melians had never paid tribute to Athens before, and refused to do so now.

Thucydides, the Athenian historian, wrote about what has come to be known as the Melian Dialogue. It describes the negotiations between Athens and Melos. The Athenians' approach was to appeal to the Melians' sense of pragmatism, pointing to the Athenian army's overwhelming strength and their "reasonable" terms for surrender. The Melians, on the other hand, appealed to the Athenians' "sense of decency". Whether or not Melos was truly neutral, ships could freely resupply there; this made Melos strategically important for Athens. On the other hand, subduing Melos would reduce the reach of Sparta's navy.

In substance, the Melian Dialogue went as follows: Athens: Surrender and pay tribute to Athens, or be destroyed.

Refusing to argue with the Melians on questions of morality, the Athenians simply assert: "The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." Melos: We are a neutral city, not an enemy, so there is no need to conquer us in your war with Sparta. Athens: If we accept your neutrality and independence, we would look weak. Our people would think that we have left you alone because we are not strong enough to conquer you. Melos: If you invade us, it will alarm the other neutral Greek states, who will then turn against you lest the same fate befalls them. Athens: The Greek states on the mainland are unlikely to act this way. Melos: It would be shameful and cowardly for us to submit without a fight. Athens: It is only shameful if there is a reasonable chance of defeating the attacker. There is no shame to submit to a superior opponent. Melos: Although you are much stronger, we would regret not trying to fight as there could still be a chance to win. Athens: This is a foolish hope. It does not come from rational analysis and is just an emotional response. Melos: The gods will help us because our position is morally just. Athens: The gods will not intervene. It is natural that the strong dominate the weak. Melos: Sparta will help defend us. Athens: Sparta are a practical people. They will not put themselves at risk when their interests are not at stake. Besides, we have the stronger navy. There is no shame in submitting to a stronger enemy offering reasonable terms. What

makes sense is to submit to superiors, stand firm against equals and be moderate to inferiors.

The Melians stuck to their position. Athens mounted a siege and finally captured the city in 416BC, executing the men, and enslaving the women and children. Some modern historians look at it as an act of genocide, a wiping off the face of the earth of an entire nation, culture and civilisation.

The Melian Dialogue is often quoted as a classic case study in "political realism", where power is assumed to be the primary goal of political acts.

Don't be weak

I asked a foreign friend whether the Melian Dialogue carried a lesson for Singapore. His response was immediate and direct. "The lesson for Singapore is straightforward. Don't be weak. Don't be weak in how you are perceived externally by others. Don't be weak internally."

I start my series of IPS-Nathan Lectures with this reference to the Melian Dialogue because "don't be weak" explains so much of Singapore. The continuous existential question for Singapore is how to respond to the argument that "what makes sense is to submit to superiors, stand firm against equals, and be moderate to inferiors", and especially on how Singapore can live under the observation that "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept".

Singapore's struggle for survival and self-determination has been with us from at least 1959, when Singapore attained internal self-government. Our quest for independence and sovereignty will continue for all our coming years.

Singapore, to my mind, is "the accidental nation", a nation unplanned in its creation and unexpected in its survival.

How can "don't be weak" explain our past, and how must "don't be weak" make our future?

My next lecture will be on "The Fourth Generation" of Singaporeans since independence. It is the generation whose days will include SG100. And my third and final lecture will be on "The Way of Hope", discussing my beliefs on how we can best secure a future for our generations to come.

The "accident" of independence

The founding political leadership of Singapore led by Mr Lee Kuan Yew had not believed that Singapore could be on its own or should be on its own. This was the real world the rational pragmatist could not escape from.

Singapore was a British colony, part of the Straits Settlements comprising Penang, Melaka and Singapore. Geographically part of the Malay peninsula, keeping Singapore separate from the Federation of Malaya was to go against the facts of geography and history even from the days before Sir Stamford Raffles founded modern Singapore in 1819.

Yet, the British had carved Singapore out of Malaya while integrating Penang and Melaka into the Federation of Malaya because Singapore hosted the largest British military establishment east of Suez. Singapore was critical for the sustenance of the British Empire.

Thus, the British granted the Federation of Malaya independence on Aug 31, 1957, while only granting Singapore full internal self-government in 1959, where the colonial administration controlled external relations and security, including internal security.

The People's Action Party led by Mr Lee Kuan Yew had, as a prime feature of its election manifesto for the general election which brought it to power in 1959, the aim of seeking to be reunited with Malaya.

The principle of "don't be weak" drove Singapore to find strength in the bigger political entity. Malaya did not welcome the idea of merger with Singapore. Singapore's predominantly Chinese population would have tilted the overall racial balance in an unwelcome way.

That Malayan politics was very much built upon ethnic lines did not make merger with Singapore an attractive proposition. On the other hand, the possibility of Singapore turning communist at that time under the tutelage of Mao's China was a most unpleasant prospect. A communist Singapore at the southern tip of the Malay peninsula would have perhaps been a worse nightmare to the Malaysians than a communist Cuba would have been to the Americans.

In 1963, the Prime Minister of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was persuaded that he had to consider the idea of merger as something that would be good for Malaya. The prospect of Kuala Lumpur being the Washington, DC, of the merged entity, the political centre, with Singapore as the New York, the commercial centre, had its attractiveness.

The challenge of ethnic distribution was ameliorated by including Sabah and Sarawak in the merger while offering the British a way out for granting independence not just to Singapore but also its Borneo colonies.

The logic of Malaysia was so intuitive that few questioned it. And even fewer in Singapore believed that Singapore could go it alone as an independent and sovereign nation.

Thus Malaysia Day, Sept 16, 1963, came with much hope and happiness, like long-lost siblings brought back together to make the family complete again.

But the family reunion was not to last. Two racial riots, in July and September 1964, brought to the fore racial distrust between the Malays and the Chinese.

In the economic sphere, Singapore sensed that the economic benefits to be expected from the merger of equal partners might not be forthcoming. Signals from Kuala Lumpur portended a weakening of Singapore, both economically and politically. As the political differences grew more acrimonious over the months, both Kuala Lumpur and Singapore came to the conclusion that the best way forward would be for Singapore to leave Malaysia.

Singapore became an independent, sovereign state on Aug 9, 1965. What had been deemed by Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his economic czar, Dr Goh Keng Swee, to be an impractical way forward for Singapore became the only practical way forward. Thus was born the accidental nation: not planned for, not hoped for, but the best of bad options. "Don't

be weak" drove us to merger in 1963. And "don't be weak" turned us towards independence in 1965.

Singapore, the little red dot

If you look at an atlas of the world, Singapore, the country, fits quite nicely in the letter "o" in its name. I do not know whether you've ever thought about it that way. If you look at this map, there's a big red circle. That's not Singapore. Singapore is the dot in the centre of the circle, and, even then, the dot is bigger than what Singapore is, geographically, for that map. Singapore fits in the letter "o" in the name of the country. Maybe that's something most of us don't quite realise until it's mentioned. The question, of course, is how do you make the country sovereign and independent despite its smallness. Indeed, in most atlases, they have to make a point of skewing the scale by enlarging the dot which represents Singapore so that it may be pointed out. That is how small Singapore is.

What are the implications for survival, security and success for a little state like Singapore? Singapore had to find its own way while facing racial tensions internally and unfriendly forces externally, with little by way of an army to defend herself. Singapore was extremely vulnerable. Malay ultra-nationalists were denouncing Singapore, and Indonesia was still conducting Konfrontasi (military confrontation) against Singapore because Indonesia had deemed the formation of Malaysia in the merger of the Federation of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore in 1963 a neo-colonialist plot.

When President B. J. Habibie of Indonesia referred to Singapore as a "little red dot" in 1998, he might have meant it as a disparaging remark. Little would he have expected that Singaporeans would take it up as a badge of honour - a symbol of succeeding despite the odds. Singapore had reached out beyond its immediate surroundings and "leapfrogged" the region to adopt the whole world as its hinterland, its source of capital, investment, research and technology, management capability, and, most of all, markets. There is no point working on industrialisation and having all the factories if you produce stuff which cannot be sold anywhere. Singapore is the result of human imagination and endeavour.

In less than two generations, Singapore had attained First World status economically, and had become a guide and a hope for other developing countries. From 1965 to 2015, Singapore's per capita gross domestic product at current market prices increased over a hundredfold, from US\$516 to US\$53,630.