

Dealing with an ambiguous world: Can Singapore cope?

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TODAY, 27 May 2016

Singapore is an anomaly that can remain relevant, survive and prosper only by continuing to be an outlier. How the Republic manages this paradox and continues to have a successful foreign policy depends on a sound domestic foundation in politics, policy and social cohesion, said Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan during his fifth and final lecture as the Institute of Policy Studies' second S R Nathan fellow. Below is an excerpt from his speech.

Fifty years is only the blink of an eye in the history of a country. Our survival, let alone success and prosperity, was not preordained. It was in fact most improbable: The result of the Government and people pulling together to defy the odds, much sweat and sacrifice, and a little luck. Can we cope with the many international and regional complexities of the post-Cold War world?

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 on 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.

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 was Prime Minister of Malaysia but muted under Prime Minister Najib. Indonesia makes no secret of it, even though President Jokowi is not hostile to us.

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 SAF (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.

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 (the Association of South-east Asian Nations); 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.

FOREIGN POLICY AMID LOCAL POLITICS

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.

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.

In 2013, Mr Pritam Singh of the Worker's Party (WP), who should have known better, asked a question in Parliament about our Middle East policies that could have stirred up the feelings of our Malay-Muslim ground against the Government. He did not do his homework. It is not difficult to demonstrate that Singapore has been consistently even-handed in our relations with Israel and Palestine.

The Arab countries understand our position and have no issue with our relations with Israel.

Some years before I retired, I was in an Arab country for talks with my counterpart. It happened to be during Operation Cast Lead, the Gaza War of 2008 to 2009. The Israel Defense Forces had moved into Gaza to stop rocket attacks against civilian targets in Israel. Horrific pictures of death and destruction were splashed across the front page of that country's English-language newspaper.

I went to the talks expecting an earful about the inequities of Israel. And I indeed got an earful — for about five minutes. My counterpart spent most of the rest of our hour-long meeting talking about the threat that Iran's nuclear programme and the Shia posed in the Middle East. And as he walked me out after the meeting, my counterpart whispered to me: "Tell your friend not to wait too long." I don't think he was referring to the United States because America is his country's friend too.

If the Arab countries do not think that our relations with Israel and our position on Palestine are problems, why was the WP asking questions about our Middle East policy? Was it to try to stir our Malay-Muslim ground against the Government? Will Singapore benefit if Singaporean Muslims become alienated from the Government or non-Muslim Singaporeans? The answers ought to be obvious. But the following year Mr Singh again asked another question in Parliament about our Middle East policy that could have inflamed our Malay-Muslim ground.

Nor is the WP the only opposition party to play fast and loose with foreign policy for partisan purposes.

On Jan 29 this year, The Straits Times published a letter from Dr Paul Tambyah in his capacity as a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). The SDP has advocated a reduction in our defence budget in favour of health spending, and Dr Tambyah was responding to a PAP MP's (People's Action Party Member of Parliament's) parliamentary speech about this policy. One of the arguments that he advanced in support of the SDP's position was so breathtakingly naive or so breathtakingly irresponsible that it is worth quoting.

"Singapore has a long history of being non-aligned in our foreign policy," Dr Tambyah

wrote. "Such an approach has served us well. Getting overly entangled in regional conflicts, especially through military means, may not be in the interests of the people of Singapore".

I agree that Singapore should not get entangled in military conflicts if at all possible. But the purpose of a strong SAF is to deter; that is to say, to prevent military conflicts from breaking out in the first place, and if deterrence should fail, to prevail. If the good doctor really thinks that being non-aligned is an adequate substitute for deterrence through a strong SAF, he ought to consult a doctor of another sort without delay: A psychiatrist. You cannot remain safe by shutting your eyes to unpleasant realities, lying low and hoping for the best. Contrary to what Dr Tambyah seems to think, Singapore is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) not because it makes us feel safe, but because we are vulnerable.

It is precisely because a small city-state gives itself hostage to fortune if it ignores the possibility of military conflict that we cannot concede any forum to any possible adversary. If deterrence fails and conflict breaks out, we must mobilise the diplomatic support of the 120 members of NAM to try to shape a political context in the United Nations which will enable the SAF to do its job as expeditiously as possible.

Dr Tambyah's boss in the SDP, Mr Chee Soon Juan, has written articles attacking our Free Trade Agreements, as if the people of a small city-state could make a living by taking in one another's laundry. 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?

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT IN 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. 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.

How does Singapore do? I can say accurately and without false modesty that the Civil Service, of which I was proud to be a part, does not do badly. We do better than other civil services in East Asia and generally better than many civil services across the world, including those of larger and more developed countries. But is this good enough for a small city-state in the more complicated external environment that we will face? 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 makes us risk averse.

It took me about a year or so to get an inter-agency consensus for Singapore to join the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, and this was an international agreement that imposed absolutely no obligations on Singapore. We subsequently did very well in arriving at national positions for the complex negotiations in the Conference of Parties (COPS) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which could serve as a model for inter-agency discussions on national positions. But this was after a Deputy Prime Minister was placed in charge of the process.

The issues in COPS certainly warranted that level of political attention. But as our domestic politics place ever increasing demands on our elected leaders, they will have less time to devote to lower-order decisions. Yet it is the accumulation of such lower-order decisions that could lead us to places we do not want to go. Slowly, but I fear

steadily, the central organising concept of our Civil Service is eroding the alertness, agility and appreciation of nuance that we will need to cope with a more complex external environment.

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. In my view, very few people can be equally good at everything.

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.

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.

CHINA AND SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL COHESION

Now, social cohesion. The US and China will take many years to reach a new *modus vivendi*. I doubt either will eschew any instrument as they compete for influence in our region.

Our politics is becoming more complicated; the political space is more crowded, with civil-society organisations and advocacy groups as well as opposition parties all vying to shape policies. This is a favourable environment for external parties to try to cultivate agents of influence.

The culture wars are upon us. Some part of our population is clearly attracted to Western attitudes towards such issues as the death penalty and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered) rights. Are these Singaporeans typical? I share some — only some, not all — of their attitudes but I don't think so. Most Singaporeans are much more conservative. In any case, fundamentalist versions of both Islam and Christianity are not absent in Singapore too and have very different attitudes which cannot be

ignored, whatever we may think of them. These issues are not going to be resolved anytime soon.

China poses a more delicate and fundamental challenge. Two years ago, the Seventh Conference of Friendship of Overseas Chinese Associations was held in Beijing. President Xi Jinping's speech at that conference was entitled "The Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation is a Dream Shared by All Chinese".

The specifics of the relationship of overseas Chinese communities to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) narrative of "The Great Rejuvenation", beyond the obvious contributions to China's growth, were not, undoubtedly deliberately, defined in detail. But the boundaries of the concept of "nation" are wide enough and vague enough to leave a lot of room for what was left unsaid.

At the end of his speech, President Xi called upon the overseas Chinese to "better integrate themselves into their local communities". But the emotionally-charged language of the speech made clear enough that the CCP also has other expectations.

President Xi described overseas Chinese as "members of the Chinese family", rejuvenation as a "shared dream", enjoined them to "never forget ... the blood of the Chinese nation flowing in their veins" and called upon them to promote "understanding" to "create a better environment for achieving the Chinese dream".

Historically, China's approach towards the overseas Chinese of South-east Asia has waxed and waned according to China's shifting objectives. South-east Asia was once an area of intense competition between the CCP and Kuomintang (KMT) for the allegiance of overseas Chinese.

By the mid-1950s, with the KMT penned in on Taiwan and wanting to cultivate friends at the Afro-Asian Bandung Conference, China disavowed responsibility for overseas Chinese communities in South-east Asia, telling them to be good citizens of the countries in which they resided. That did not stop the CCP from using "United Front" tactics during the 1950s and 1960s to advance the interests of the South-east Asian communist parties it supported, notably the Malayan Communist Party, which consisted mainly of ethnic Chinese.

When Vietnam, with the support of the Soviet Union, invaded and occupied Cambodia in 1979, the imperatives of Sino-Soviet competition and rallying Asean against Vietnam took priority. China ceased all support for South-east Asian communist parties.

The Cambodian issue preoccupied China in South-east Asia throughout the 1980s. The priority was consolidating official relations with the Asean governments. From the 1990s,

with Cambodia out of the way, China turned its attention to deepening and consolidating economic and diplomatic ties with South-east Asia. The overseas Chinese communities were then largely regarded as a source of investment and economic expertise.

In 1998, vicious anti-Chinese riots broke out in Jakarta during the run-up to Suharto's fall. China issued a mild admonition to Jakarta to treat Indonesian Chinese better and punish those responsible. Mild as it was, this broke with the practice of 40 years.

Last year, shortly after racially fraught demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur, the Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia made his way to Chinatown and, close to where the police had to use water cannons to break up a potentially violent anti-Chinese demonstration, pronounced the Chinese government's opposition to, among other things, any form of racial discrimination, adding for good measure that Beijing would not stand idly by if anything threatened China's relations with Malaysia.

What was the Ambassador trying to do? Was he really trying to help the Malaysian Chinese? If he was, I don't think he did them any favours. Or was he trying to highlight China's clout in the context of rising competition with the US? I think so.

This apparent shift towards positioning China as the protector of South-east Asian Chinese has created many uncertainties, with direct implications for Singapore. If anti-Chinese violence should again break out in Indonesia or Malaysia — a possibility that unfortunately cannot be ruled out — how would Beijing respond?

Since China has associated the overseas Chinese with the CCP's narrative of the "Great Rejuvenation", can Beijing still respond in as carefully calibrated a manner as it did in 1998? Will its own people let it do so?

In 1998, the Internet was in its infancy in China. There are now some 700 million netizens in China, easily aroused through social media. How will China's response affect our neighbours' attitudes towards us? How would non-Chinese Singaporeans react? After 50 years, does our collective Singapore identity now override ethnic identities?

Chinese leaders and officials refer to Singapore as a "Chinese country" that should therefore "understand" China better and hint at their generosity if we should "explain" China to other Asean countries.

We politely but clearly and firmly point out that Singapore is not a "Chinese country". We know all too well what they really mean by "understand" and "explain". But they persist. The idea of a multiracial meritocracy is alien to China, which seems incapable of conceiving of a Chinese-majority country in any other way than as a "Chinese country" and a potential instrument of its policy.

This mode of thought is deeply embedded in Chinese culture and political practice and will not change. As China becomes more confident and assertive, it will probably become more insistent.

It would be prudent not to underestimate the resonance that the idea of Singapore as a “Chinese country” linked to a rising China could have with some sections of our population. There are many potential avenues through which China could bypass the Government to try to directly exercise influence on our people. China still has a United Front Work Department under the CCP’s Central Committee.

If we were ever foolish enough to accept — or are compelled to concede to — the characterisation of Singapore as a “Chinese country”, this would not only provoke a counter-reaction from other major powers; more critically, the multiracial compact of social cohesion which is the foundation of independent Singapore’s success would be at least severely strained if not entirely broken.

Once lost, this foundation will be extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to rebuild.

But it would also be foolish to alienate China, which must be a significant factor in our economic future. Maintaining a good relationship with China, while preserving the autonomy to pursue our interests as we define them, is the fine line we must walk.

IDEA OF OUR VULNERABILITY NOT A SCARE TACTIC

We have so far managed this delicate balancing act. But Singapore is only 50 years old. I doubt all our compatriots fully understand the complexity of the contradictory forces at play upon us. Many younger Singaporeans who take the only Singapore they have known for granted are sceptical about our inherent vulnerability. Some dismiss vulnerability as a scare tactic designed to keep the PAP in power.

Since we do not yet have a self-correcting internal equilibrium, sooner or later equilibrium may have to be enforced by the coercive powers that are the legitimate monopoly of the state, including the powers of the Internal Security Act (ISA).

It would at least be prudent to keep such instruments in reserve and not discard them as some opposition parties would naively have us do. The use of the ISA for this purpose will almost certainly be depicted as “political” by those who seek its abolition and cause problems for us with the US and Europe. But that would be the lesser cost.

We need to do a much better job of national education and are paying a price for de-emphasising history in our national curriculum. What now passes as national education is ritualised, arousing as much cynicism as understanding. Knowledge of our own history

should not be only a matter for specialists.

The controversy over the 1963 Operation Coldstore and whether those detained were part of the communist United Front exposed the extent to which the public lacuna of understanding may allow puerile and pernicious views to gain currency. Our understanding of history must of course be constantly revised.

But critical historical thinking is not just a matter of braying black when the established view is white. This was not just an academic exercise. For some, it was a politically motivated attempt to cast doubt on the Government's overall credibility by undermining the Government's narrative on one particular historical event. I understand that steps are being taken to revise our history curriculum. It will take time for this to have an effect but the problem is at least recognised.

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.