

Dealing with an ambiguous world

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The Middle Ground, 26 May 2016

IT HAS been a long road, but the end is finally in sight. I thank all of you who were patient and hardy enough to have travelled it with me. I must also thank the Institute of Policy Studies for forcing me to shake off my natural sloth and crystallise my thoughts.

Singapore is in much better shape than in 1965. Our economy is more robust and diversified, linked by a network of Free Trade Agreements (FTA) to the major economies. The SAF is strong and deterrence keeps our neighbourhood honest. We enjoy good relations with all the major powers. We have a wide and respected diplomatic network. Our city is safe with public services provided at a level of efficiency that is the envy of other cities. Of course, we are not perfect and as Mr Lee Kuan Yew has observed, Singaporeans are also champion grumblers.

That we have this dubious distinction is perhaps a measure of success. Some years ago, we had flash floods in Orchard Road. A Vietnamese friend happened to be in Singapore for an ASEAN meeting. He had read in The Straits Times about floods in Singapore.

Where? He asked. Outside your hotel, I replied. He laughed.

In Hanoi we only call it floods when the water reaches our waist, he said. I am old enough to remember when we regularly had floods in my friend's definition. I can remember a poor, disorderly, dirty Singapore without a proper sewage system and clean water for every household. I can remember riots and curfew. But I belong to probably the last generation that has personal experience of such a Singapore.

A SMALL STATE IN A BIG SEA

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 that previous lectures have outlined?

Before I answer the question, let us remind ourselves of some of the enduring realities that confront a small city-state in Southeast Asia. The US shrugs off political dysfunctions to remain the preeminent global power.

China and Russia have endured traumas that would have caused small countries to vanish without a trace. Japan, Germany and South Korea have recovered from self-inflicted wounds that would have killed smaller countries. In Berlusconi's Italy, politics was theatre, but Italy remains a member of the G-7.

Cocooned by the EU, between 2010 and 2011, Belgium went without a government for almost 20 months. Indonesia absorbs governmental incoherence, inefficiency and

corruption but remains relevant despite everything because it is big and rich in resources.

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 (UN). 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 in the UN.

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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 Southeast 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 Southeast 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. 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 SAF 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.

WAR AND DIPLOMACY

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 Southeast 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 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 Southeast 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.

In 2013, Mr Pritam Singh of the Worker's Party, 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 2008-2009. 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 a earful about the inequities of Israel. And I indeed got a 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 US 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 Workers' Party asking questions about our Middle East policy?

Was it to try and 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 Workers' Party the only opposition party to play fast and loose with foreign policy for partisan purposes.

On January 29 this year, coincidentally the day I delivered my first lecture in this series, 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 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. Being non-aligned did not save Sihanouk's Cambodia or Souvanna Phouma's Laos from getting entangled in military conflicts with very tragic consequences for their peoples.

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 and shape a political context in the UN which will enable the SAF to do its job as expeditiously as possible.

Every war must eventually end. The political context within which a war was fought will be a significant influence on whether the conflict will end on the best possible terms. Many wars have been won on the battlefield only to be lost at the negotiating table.

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War and diplomacy are not alternatives; they are different sides of the same coin that complement each other. We live in a region that for all the reasons I advanced in my previous lectures, 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?

The SDP and other opposition parties have never given any answer to this question that I have found convincing. The results of the last general election and the recently concluded by-election suggest that my scepticism is shared by many.

Dr Tambyah's boss in the SDP, Mr Chee Soon Juan, has written articles attacking our FTAs, 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?

CIVIL WRONGS?

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? 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. In a previous lecture I argued that a new US-China *modus vivendi* will not be determined by a deliberate process of negotiation but will be the consequence of many ad hoc responses to situations taken at various levels and in different domains.

Similarly, 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.

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. Most bureaucracies operate better top down and we are no exception. But as our domestic politics places 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.

Let me give you three examples:

In 2011, MFA concluded that Singapore should try to become an Observer in the Arctic Council. Global warming could eventually change sea routes with

potentially profound implications for us. It was only prudent to have early warning of what could become possible in the Arctic.

The criteria for Observership spanned several agencies. Their responses were lukewarm. It was the long odds against a small tropical island succeeding and the lack of any immediate institutional advantage that put them off. MFA decided to go ahead alone and placed one of our most wily and experienced Ambassadors in charge.

Only when his efforts began to gain traction did other agencies come on board. Singapore was elected as an Observer in 2013.

In 2014, the SAF conducted a military exercise with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Nanjing Military Region in China. We must build a relationship with the PLA as part of our overall engagement with a rising China.

The Nanjing Military Region is responsible for Taiwan, with which we have long-standing unofficial ties. The headquarters of the PLA Navy's East Sea Fleet which covers the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, whose sovereignty is disputed by China and Japan, is located at Ningbo within the region. The PLA then had six other military regions. Nothing was said, but eyebrows must have been raised in Tokyo and Taipei and perhaps Washington too, at the choice of Nanjing.

This was not a question of linguistic competency but of Singapore's identity. Our political leaders have always conducted official business in English with Chinese leaders even when they are fluent in Chinese.

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None of these episodes resulted in irreversible damage to Singapore's interests. But they are symptoms, the ultimate cause of which is, I think, the concept around which our civil service is organised.

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.

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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 par with Administrative Service Officers holding similar appointments.

Unless this is so, a caste may be perpetuated.

The mindset of a caste is dangerous for a city-state. C. P. Snow attributed the decline of another city-state to its prior success: "They were fond of the pattern", he said of Venice. "They never found the will to break it."

None of this is a criticism of any individual. My criticism is of a system that incentivises certain modes of thought and certain patterns of behaviour. There is no doubt that the system is changing. Whether it will change fast enough and far enough is another question.

But even within the existing system there are always exceptions: my two immediate predecessors and my successor in MFA are examples.

In case any of you are wondering, I have held these views throughout my career and never made any secret of them. The Public Service Division (PSD) was probably relieved when I retired. I found the PSD's announcement of my retirement in 2013 tellingly amusing.

It said I had 31 years of service. But I joined the Foreign Service in 1981 and was shanghaied into the Administrative Service only in 1983. Do the math.

It was as if the PSD by some Kafkaesque conjuration had caused the time I spent as a Foreign Service Officer to vanish. In fact nobody seemed to be able to make up their minds about how long I served: the customary letters and certificates of appreciation I received all credited me with different lengths of service.

Changing mindsets is always difficult.

DREAM ON

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 which need not always be witting. As the only country in Southeast Asia with an ethnic Chinese majority population and arguably the most cosmopolitan and Westernised elite, Singapore faces unique vulnerabilities.

My last lecture recounted how we once had to expel an American diplomat for trying to interfere in our domestic politics and alluded to the attitudes and activities of

some European diplomats as well. Were these exceptional incidents never to be repeated since they had been caught with their hands in the cookie jar?

I doubt it. The attitudes that gave rise to these episodes are so fundamentally a part of the Western sense of self that they will never go away. But now that the fierce glow of post-Cold War hubris has been dampened by its Middle Eastern misadventures in nation-building, and with China a growing preoccupation, I doubt too that the US has much appetite for trying to effect political change in Singapore in the same way as they tried in the late 1980s.

At least for now, the Americans, and the Europeans, will indulge their missionary instincts with occasional meddling in second or third order issues.

They will have opportunities to do so. 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 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. Sooner or later some Western diplomat blinded by ideology to our social and cultural fault lines, will again breach acceptable diplomatic conduct by trying to tip the balance in favour of some group he thinks shares values he believes to be universal.

We'll just have to paddle their bottoms when we catch them.

China poses a more delicate and fundamental challenge. A previous lecture had drawn attention to the manner in which growing economic ties with China were changing calculations of interests in Southeast Asia and even in US allies such as Australia. China's relationship with the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia is a closely related issue.

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 Southeast Asia has waxed and waned according to China’s shifting objectives. Southeast 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 Southeast 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 Southeast 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 Southeast Asian communist parties. The Cambodian issue preoccupied China in Southeast 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 Southeast 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 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.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson defended his actions as “normal”. This apparent shift towards positioning China as the protector of Southeast 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" who 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.

We are not immune to these visceral seductions or to the economic inducements that some other ASEAN countries have eagerly embraced. There are many potential avenues through which China could bypass the government to try and 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.

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.

FROM PAST TO FUTURE

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.

Critical historical thinking is not just a matter of braying black when the established view is white.

Ladies & Gentlemen, mine is a counsel of realism not despair. 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.

Thank you very much for listening to me.

The agency which concluded an MOU with China has told Mr Kausikan that it has since rectified the situation. IPS informed TMG that on Mr Kausikan’s request, this point has been deleted from the published version of his speech [here](#).

Mr Bilahari Kausikan is ambassador-at-large in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore. He is also the Institute of Policy Studies' 2015/16 S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore. This speech was delivered during his fifth and final IPS-Nathan Lecture on May 25, 2016.