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"LEAD SINGAPORE, IF I CAN'T SERVE IN MALAYSIA"
LEE KUAN YEW AND THE SINGAPORE "MODEL"

CORE COURSE ESSAY

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“Lead Singapore, If I Can’t Serve in Malaysia” Lee Kuan Yew and the Singapore “Model”

Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s Prime Minister for the first 31 years following independence from Great Britain, led his city-state through one of the most incredible transformations of the twentieth century. In the midst of the Cold War competition between superpowers, retrenching colonial powers and rising nationalism within his region, Lee converted Singapore from a relatively minor colonial trading port to a global financial and industrial giant. In the process he built a dynamic, vibrant nation-state, a model of prosperity and stability. This paper examines Lee Kuan Yew’s statecraft. It investigates the events and influences that shaped his actions and Lee’s assumptions about the international and domestic environment. It also frames Singapore’s national security interests, goals and objectives following independence and threats to those interests. Finally, this paper analyzes the major policies and instruments of statecraft Lee used to satisfy national security interests and concludes with an assessment of the quality of Lee’s approach from a Singaporean and an American perspective.

Following independence from Great Britain in 1959, Lee and the leadership of his political party, the People’s Action Party (PAP), campaigned to bring about the *logical* merger with Malaysia. While Lee felt Singapore’s survival depended on this merger, Malayan leaders hesitated for various reasons including fear of the impact of Singapore’s Chinese majority on Malay state politics. From 1963 to 1965, Singapore and Malaysia experimented with the merger with disappointing results in the financial arena, racial and religious tension, and communal violence. On 9 August 1965, Malaysia expelled Singapore from the Federation.¹ This event shook Lee and his leadership to the core. They had devoted their careers to winning independence for a united

¹ B. L. LePoer, *Singapore: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1991), pp. 53-56.

Singapore and Malaysia; now separation from Malaysia had been thrust upon them. Lee told Singaporeans in his announcement address, "For me, it is a moment of anguish. All my life, my whole adult life, I have believed in merger and unity of the two territories."² Singapore, a city-state of 2 million people with no natural resources, inadequate water supply and little indigenous defense capability now found itself alone. Lee faced the daunting challenge of building a nation against seemingly impossible odds.

When viewing the environment that framed the task ahead, Lee saw a tenuous structure. Singapore was a minor city-state in a world dominated by a balance of power struggle between competing superpower ideologies. The region was in transition following retreat of former colonial powers and weathering the storms of rising nationalism. Major actors in the region had different motivations. Malaysia sought independence from Great Britain and feared the influence of the Chinese majority in Singapore. Indonesia aspired to establishing a Greater Indonesia that included Borneo and Malaysia.³ Great Britain sought to reduce commitments abroad and withdraw from the region as quickly as possible.

Lee believed Singapore was not viable by itself. Even though Singapore was cutting the umbilical from its recent partners, the new nation was not completely weaned. It depended on Malaysia and the rest of the region for trade and on the British for security and economic stability. Lee believed Great Britain would retain ties with Singapore and Malaysia though with a reduced forward presence. East Asia was sure to grow economically. The Cold War's ideological competition would continue and communists would continue attempting to subvert and control regional governments. Despite early apprehension regarding its neighbors, Lee believed

² Ibid p 57

³ Chan Heng Chee *Singapore: The Politics of Survival 1965-1967* (London: Oxford University Press, Elv House) p 54

cooperation would grow to the point where reliance on the West would diminish. He ultimately believed the key to Singapore's economic viability was industrialization, diversification and the removal of its dependence on any one nation

Lee's grand strategy was built on three fundamental pillars of vital national security interests (1) physical security, (2) economic welfare and prosperity, and (3) the construction and preservation of Singaporean values at home. As a new nation, survival and nation-building were the key issues, consequently, Lee's national security interests and objectives flowed from those imperatives.

First and foremost, Lee had to provide for defense of the nation. Singapore felt the major threat to its existence was communist movements in the region and the potential for internal unrest. Additionally, Indonesia was still a potentially aggressive, larger neighbor having violently opposed the Malaysia/Singapore merger. Malaysia had also proven hostile to Singapore. Lee, unwilling to be "left isolated and friendless...encircled by a hostile sea of communal and obscurant forces," knew he had to devise strategies and means of deterring aggression. This became particularly pressing with Great Britain's decision to draw down its presence in the region and close military bases on Singapore. At the time the British were providing Singapore's sea and air defense; this turn of events could have been disastrous had Lee not taken action.

Calling on his diplomatic skills, he went to England and convinced British leadership and its public to delay withdrawal while he continued building the Singaporean military. This typified Lee—a master of turning potential adversity to maximum advantage. To create a professional military force, Lee used the resources of a country he thought similar to Singapore for its isolation among potential enemies. Because of Israel's experience in successfully defending itself from

numerically superior forces, Lee hired Israeli advisors to train the core of his new army. Acknowledging his nation's weak military capability, Lee declared a policy of neutrality and non-alignment following Switzerland's model (another country he admired).⁴ In the interim, Lee effectively sought and gained security under big power umbrellas. Over time, Singapore developed a "defensive security outlook that emphasized the maintenance of strong military relations with other nations of ASEAN, the Five-Powers Defense Agreement and other noncommunist states."⁵

Concurrently with ensuring the physical security of Singapore, Lee laid the plans for promoting economic diversity, industrialization and modernization, the second pillar of his national security strategy. The loss of Great Britain, aside from rocking Singapore's defense capability, threatened to wreak havoc on its economy. Lee seized the opportunity to capitalize on the withdrawal, first by employing the substantial, modern infrastructure left in place and, secondly, by opening up Singapore to other foreign investors. This later initiative addressed another deficiency of Singapore's economy--the shortage of domestic entrepreneurs. Lee attracted foreign investment by providing access to his country's highly skilled, disciplined, and relatively low paid work force. He also offered attractive tax advantages to investors in exchange for capital equipment, technology marketing techniques and export markets. Unwilling to operate on exclusive free market principles, the government actively participated in all facets of industry

The government was responsible for planning and budgeting for everything from international finance to trash collection. [It] owned, controlled, regulated, or allocated land, labor and capital resources set or influenced many of the pieces on which private investors based business calculations and investment decisions. State intervention in the economy had a positive impact not only on private business profitability but also on the general welfare of the population. Beyond the jobs created in the private and public sectors, the government provided subsidized housing, education,

⁴ LePoer p. 42

⁵ Ibid p. 248

and health and recreational services, as well as public transportation⁶

Lee felt such tight control and involvement necessary to maintain control of the nation's economic engine, but established long-term policies to privatize parts of the state-owned enterprises

Initially, Singapore's economic development was threatened by trade wars with its neighbors, notably, Malaysia. C.M. Turnbull, in A History of Singapore, portrays an East Asian trading environment characterized by restrictive policies and competing, vice complementary, economies. Lee looked to countries outside the region for building economic bridges. Turnbull states, 'Singapore adopted a policy of non-alignment, aiming to win recognition and to establish friendly relations and trading links with all countries, regardless of ideology.' Thus, for primarily economic reasons, Lee saw it clearly in Singapore's interest to promote and preserve a stable international environment. Indeed, Singapore's tremendous growth would not have been possible without commensurate economic growth in Europe, the United States, China and Japan--an environment that Lee actively cultivated through trade alliances and bi-lateral initiatives. Singapore's quest for economic well-being occupied the full scope of Lee's attention and drove some of the most profound changes in the history of the nation since independence.

The government of Singapore knew the first two goals, security and economic prosperity would be unattainable without building a stable domestic environment, the third national security strategy pillar. Systemic problems such as high unemployment, population growth, and inadequate education and housing presented Lee with formidable challenges in orchestrating Singapore's economic miracle. Lee saw opportunities to modernize not just the infrastructure of Singapore, but to redefine the structure of his nation.

⁶ Ibid p 127

Recognizing that the key to attracting foreign investment was in offering political stability and disciplined workforce, Lee proceeded to enact measures to preserve social order. Capitalizing on East Asian values of scholarship, hard work, thrift and deferment of present enjoyment for future gain, Lee fashioned a Singaporean model of *social control* which successfully prevented the development of any meaningful challenge to government authority⁷. Three major policies dramatically define the scope of government social control policies.

Because uncontrolled population growth placed too high a strain on the economy, the Singaporean government restricted families to two children through a full system of incentives and penalties. In addition, the government took an active role 'providing opportunity for matching males and females of the same academic and professional stock.' The government also implemented a forced relocation program to support the requirement for land (a scarce commodity). As a planned consequence of the relocation and public housing policies, Lee obtained land for industrialization and, as James Minchin points out, helped to foster a Singaporean identity by "breaking up natural communities based on affinity of race, clan, religion, language or dialect." Minchin cites the third social control policy, *streaming* students early on in the school system as an effective method to "pinpoint each person's place in the talent pyramid and convert the talent pyramid into the expertise pyramid ready to better serve the needs of a modern industrial society. Lee designed Singapore's education system to produce a class of elites schooled in scientific and technical disciplines. These elites would assist in nation-building by virtue of merit, instilled with

⁷ The term social control defines the character of social relations in Singapore. Used in this context it refers to the all encompassing role of the state, the intentional and explicit nature of its regulatory practices, the perceptions of Singaporeans themselves and the constant threat of state violence.
Christopher Tremewan *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. 1994) pp. 1-5

the proper values--belief in hard work, thrift, scholarship and deferment of present enjoyment for future gain.

Lee Kuan Yew masterfully exercised his statecraft. The results are compelling--Singapore today has a higher per capita GNP than its former colonial master, second to Japan in Asia. It is a major center of global manufacturing and service industries and shares in 80 percent of all ASEAN trade. Lee started the long (in distance covered) journey toward this economic miracle by recognizing Singapore's limitations--natural resources, influence and power--and establishing realistic goals to support its interests--physical security, economic welfare and prosperity, and cultivation and preservation Singaporean values. Lee accomplished his goals in a uniquely Singaporean way. But there were costs of modernization, acceptable to Singapore, but unpalatable in the United States. Turnbull aptly notes,

Democracy was the first casualty to the independent government's success and socialism the second. In order to convert herself into an industrial society, Singapore had to shed her radical image, to woo nervous foreign capital and provide incentives to hesitant local capitalists. This meant not only ensuring political stability but drastically modifying socialist principles, both in state planning and in the ownership of economic wealth.

Inherent in the ideas of this passage is the fundamental disconnect between Lee's model and the Western perspective. Lee believes the rights of the individual are subservient to orderly society and that it is the role of government to provide economic growth and technological advancement; not liberty, justice and the pursuit of happiness. Apart from its economic prowess, Singapore is also noted for its autocratic rule, intolerance for views inconsistent with official policy and repressive internal security. "Class, race, gender, religion, all have been used as tools in Singapore's social class experiment which has resulted in the increasing disempowerment of ethnic

minorities, the creation of a docile Chinese working-class, the political emasculation of the professional elite, and one of the highest suicide rates in Asia.”⁸ Without passing a value judgment on the latter view of Singapore, it is appropriate to evaluate the nation in a larger context than per capita GNP, balance of payments and freedom from external coercion. This very directly crosses the threshold of how the Singapore model would sell in the United States. Practices accepted in Singapore, e.g., detention without trial, revocation of citizenship and deportation of political activists, government matchmaking, run counter to the Western liberal democracy. Our societies hold dear different views on the role of government in society and individual political and civil rights. As Lee stated, “certain liberties in a developing nation sometimes have to be sacrificed for the sake of economic development and security.”⁹ An American founding father would not have chosen Lee’s approach but it’s difficult to argue with Lee’s economic and security results.

Lee’s statecraft reflects a realist’s approach, first exploiting balance of power structures to achieve security then manipulating alliances for strategic advantage. He established achievable objectives for his nation--freedom from hostile powers, economic prosperity and internal stability--then crafted the social structure to accomplish its goals. Lee met adversity with purpose, drive and force of will. From a Singaporean perspective, Lee succeeded. He developed political, economic and security ties within the region while expanding relations with nations outside. He created a stable domestic environment that attracted foreign investment and spurred economic prosperity. And, perhaps most significant, he developed a national identity within the multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-cultural society that was Singapore. In short, he built a nation.

⁸ Ibid. p ix
⁹ Ibid p 190

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