

Principle, Policy and Diplomacy in International Relations.

(Lecture to Singapore Institute of Arbitrators, 6 September 2022)

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong devoted much of his Chinese language National Day Rally Speech this year to the geopolitical challenges facing Singapore. He warned Singaporeans to **“actively guard against hostile foreign influence operations, regardless of where they originate” in order to safeguard Singapore’s sovereignty and independence.**

Since my retirement, I have spent much time writing and talking about this serious challenge. It is not a new challenge. In 2017, we expelled a Chinese academic with both PRC and US citizenship employed by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy for acting as an agent of influence of a foreign power. We did not name the foreign power but the academic in question is now happily living and working in China not America. In the late 1980s, we expelled an American diplomat for interfering in our domestic politics. There were other influence operations that had been exposed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Competition among major powers is an inherent characteristic of an international system of sovereign states. But after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, competition was muted by the overwhelming

dominance of the US and for a period -- between circa 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down, and circa 2008 when the global financial crisis led many to become disillusioned with American-led globalization -- seemed to have faded away.

But this was a historically short and anomalous period. For most of the 20th century, international order was fiercely contested; major power competition for influence was the norm. We have now returned to a more historically normal period of contested order with the main contest now being between the US and China, with Russia as the junior partner **on China's side**. For all its violence and danger, Ukraine is a secondary issue. At least in our region, misinformation on the war in Ukraine is largely an instrument of US-China competition.

Major power competition is not just a matter of diplomatic and military maneuvering. It is also a struggle for the minds of the public – to affect policies by shaping public opinion. The US, Russia and China, among others, conduct influence operations. But it was the battle with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) supported United Front in the 1950s and early 1960s that most profoundly shaped **Singapore's political** history.

The United Front is a specific influence tactic and was hard enough to deal with back then. But what was at stake then was starkly clear. However, during the 20 years or so when great power competition seemed to have faded away, instincts honed during that struggle grew flabby. We became

less alert because countering influence operations seemed irrelevant to dealing with a China that embraced market reforms and opening up.

China has indeed profoundly changed in many ways. But while class struggle no longer motivates Chinese policy, China is still a communist system and the CCP is still a Leninist style vanguard-party. The United Front is the characteristic instrument of the vanguard-party. Mao Zedong called it the **CCP's "magic weapon"** a term that Xi Jinping has borrowed. In 2018, Xi placed overseas Chinese affairs, hitherto a state function, under the **CCP's United Front work department**.

Unlike during the earlier period of major power competition, social media which blurs the distinction between information and opinion, does not distinguish between informed and uninformed opinion, or between opinion of any kind and entertainment, has now given the influence apparatus of all countries a powerful new tool. It is extremely difficult to deal with social media because its reach is faster, wider, and more insidious.

By coincidence, the same morning as the rally – 21 August – the Sunday Times had published a short piece of mine in which I had argued that the consequence of foreign influence operations was to confuse Singaporeans about our fundamental national interests.

The Prime Minister had made clear that our position on **Russia's** aggression against Ukraine was not about taking

sides with the US or against Russia, but acting in our own interests. There could not have been a more explicit **statement of Singapore's interests than that** by the Foreign Minister in Parliament on 28 February, only four days after the invasion. There could not have been a more egregious violation of the principles on which our interests were based than a massive cross-border invasion by a big country of a smaller country whose very right to exist as an independent and sovereign state was denied by the big country.

And yet the misrepresentation of our position as a **'taking sides'** stubbornly persists, seemingly impervious to facts. I do not think this is by accident.

A few months ago, an international financial institution asked me to speak to a group of their top clients about Ukraine. One of the audience insisted – loudly and at inordinate length -- **that Singapore had made a mistake 'siding' with Ukraine** because Russia was winning. At that time, the Russian offensive to capture Kyiv had already failed and Russian forces had withdrawn to the Donbass. This was an educated and successful man but he refused to listen to facts that contradicted his beliefs. It was as if he was living on another planet. That was not the only instance of denial of fact I have experienced. Sadly, that gentleman was far from atypical.

The majority of **Singaporeans support the government's** position on Ukraine. But there is, I think, a not insignificant minority that is at least ambivalent.

In March 2022, a private polling company found that while 69% of Singaporeans surveyed held Russia responsible for the war, a total of 26% either did not know or held the EU, the US, or NATO responsible. Similarly, while 60% supported sanctions against Russia, 39% either did not know, had no opinion, or opposed sanctions. If there is ambivalence about such a straight-forward issue as the invasion of one country by another, I am sure that there will be much more ambivalence about the complexities and nuances of US-China competition.

I think the problem goes well beyond lack of understanding of particular issues or inaccurate or misleading information about particular issues. Accurate information is of course very important. Prime Minister Lee had asked Singaporeans to be vigilant about information received through social media, to check facts and not accept everything as truth. That is very necessary. But more fundamentally, I believe it is lack of understanding of the nature of international relations in general that causes Singaporeans to be susceptible to misleading or inaccurate information or to deny facts that do not fit their preconceptions.

Most people in any country take only a sporadic and casual interest in international affairs. There is no reason for them to do otherwise. They have their own lives to live. So when events force themselves onto the public's attention as Ukraine has done, there is a tendency among the general public to subconsciously fit them into familiar but simplistic

mental frameworks. If the facts do not fit into such tidy frameworks, too bad for the facts.

Casual observers of international relations often look at them almost as we would a sporting event, which is one kind of subconscious framework. They cheer one side or another as if nothing more is at stake than a clear-cut outcome – win, lose or draw. But the outcomes of international issues are seldom so satisfyingly neat. More often than not, they are messy compromises. Few international problems can be definitively resolved, only managed; the management of one problem or issue spawns other issues or problems that in turn also need management in a complex process in which diplomacy and the implementation of foreign policy must be continually adjusted according to the contingencies of circumstances.

For the general public, the result of this confused and confusing process is often denial or cynicism in which the idea of the national interest becomes at least blurred if not entirely lost. Yet in an era of renewed major power competition, it is vitally important that foreign policy rest on a foundation of public support and the best defense against foreign influence operations is an informed public.

This lecture hopes to make a very modest contribution to public understanding by analyzing the interplay between principles, policy and diplomacy and by so doing, clarifying the nature of international relations in all its manifold complexities and contradictions. I do not know whether I will

succeed, but nothing is ever gained without venture and I am grateful to the Institute of Arbitrators for having given me the opportunity to try.

Every sovereign state is a member of the United Nations (UN) and in theory relations between them are subject to the principles, purposes, and procedures of the UN Charter. But the reality is that Charter principles are often only secondary considerations, and in any case will be emphasized or downplayed according to the exigencies of circumstances. They are often evoked only as aspirations.

Principles do not naturally prioritize themselves or order themselves into neat hierarchies. The thread that runs through the work of Isaiah Berlin – a 20th century British political philosopher that deserves to be more widely read – is that there is not one Supreme Good but many Goods each desirable in itself, but not necessarily capable of simultaneous realization. Similarly, the UN Charter contains a host of principles, each with their own validity, but not necessarily reconcilable or applicable in any particular situation.

Choice is therefore unavoidable, all the more so since principles and values are in different contexts both ends in themselves and means to other ends. This includes the principle that stands at the heart of international relations: sovereignty.

Why do countries value sovereignty? It is to exercise the agency to choose in order to navigate the maze of

international relations in accordance with their own interests. The national interest is the central organizing concept in international relations. It is the basis on which states make their choices. That is why **the public's lack of clarity** or confusion about our national interests can be so damaging.

The national interest is not a difficult concept to grasp in broad terms. But a broad understanding of the idea begs **crucial questions. Once we get past generalities like 'survival' or 'prosperity' and their like, which prescribe nothing particularly useful for making specific policies, how do we determine what do we need to do to 'survive' or 'prosper' in situations which are constantly evolving? What are the principles or values by which we can derive the ultimate guiding interest by which we navigate an uncertain world?**

There is a rather silly academic debate about the relative importance of values and interests in international relations. It is silly because values *are* interests. This is true of every country even those whose values we do not share. We should not make the mistake of believing that only what we find attractive or useful are the only valid values. Values that we may find abhorrent are valid values to those that hold them or find them useful. Universality is a myth.

Claiming that what we find convenient to believe is universal is common in the West, but is not a peculiarly western mistake. **Xi Jinping's China makes a parallel mistake when he asserts that 'all Chinese' should support his China Dream.**

This is universality with Chinese characteristics. When Xi says **'all Chinese'** he exploits the ambiguity of the several meanings of the term **'Chinese'** in the Chinese language to claim the loyalty of the race or nation defined ethnically not territorially for his China Dream. **In effect, he is claiming that 'all Chinese' should understand their interests in terms of China's interests, at least on issues that are of importance to China.**

Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, Taiwan, or even many in Hong Kong which is already incorporated into **the People's Republic**, would not all agree. But in its appeal to ethnic sentimentality, it must be admitted that the ethno-nationalist narrative **of China's humiliation, rejuvenation and finally attaining the China Dream**, is not without resonance in overseas Chinese communities, including in Singapore, particularly to those with only a casual interest in international affairs. But this is not **a 'dream' that is relevant to Singapore's** most fundamental interests.

On 16th and 17th December 1965, only a few months after we had independence thrust upon us, our first foreign minister, Mr. S. Rajaratnam, spoke in parliament setting out **Singapore's foreign policy. The speech deserves to be better remembered.** Every subsequent speech by Singapore foreign ministers is an elaboration of or commentary on this seminal **speech. After discussing several aspects of Singapore's national interests, Mr. Rajaratnam concluded, "our ultimate goal is the preservation of the essential values on which our society is founded."**

The **'essential values'** Mr. Rajaratnam referred to was the idea of Singapore as a multiracial society based on meritocracy. This was the reason why we could not remain within a Malaysia organized on entirely different lines. This essential value is the fundamental criterion on which we base our choices. It is our core national interest.

Singapore is not a perfect multiracial meritocracy – there is no perfection to be found this side of heaven – but it is an idea that we take very seriously and this idea distinguishes us from others in the Indo-Pacific. Every other country organizes itself or aspires to organize itself on the basis of formal or informal ethnic or religious hierarchy and often both. Hierarchy is too often asserted or defended by force.

Multiracial meritocracy makes us unique. We take the principle of sovereignty seriously in order to preserve this unique **'essential value' of multiracial meritocracy and protect** the choice we made in 1965 when staying in Malaysia proved unsustainable because of our commitment to this value. This value is the foundation of our social cohesion and all that flows from it that keeps us successful and thus relevant. Relevance not something small city-states can take for granted.

Our uniqueness in this respect does not necessarily endear us to our closest neighbours who organize their own societies on diametrically opposed lines. When we do better, as we must, this is taken as an implicit criticism of their systems. Ultimately, when problems arise with our neighbours, it is less

about what we do and more about what we are. But we cannot compromise on this even if it means occasional frictions with our neighbours.

Standing firm does not just apply to our immediate neighbours. Despite close relations with the US, we expelled the American diplomat because in interfering in our domestic affairs, he was trying to introduce American values that he thought desirable into our political system. Only Singaporeans should decide what our values should be.

The assertion that ‘all Chinese’ should support the China Dream is a far more direct, indeed existential, attack on multiracial meritocracy. It is an explicitly ethnic appeal to the majority of our population to extrapolate a demographic fact into the re-characterization of Singapore as a **‘Chinese country’**. Other more narrowly targeted extra-territorial appeals to our minorities, to religious values, or to secular attitudes such as LGBT rights, do not pose quite the same danger because they do not attack the fundamental organizing principle of our society. Their appeal is limited and it is improbable that they can change the entire character of our society.

That Singapore conducts a principled foreign policy based on support for world governed by rules and law as being in the interest of small states generally and the best way to protect our values, are core axioms of our approach to international relations. We take them very seriously and consistently explain our foreign policy in these terms. Still, axioms are only

just that – axioms. They are simplifications of complex realities; true but with qualifications left unstated. If we do not make the qualifications explicit, it is because the exigencies of diplomacy often does not make it convenient to be too explicit about them.

A pensioner like me has no such constraints. The most important unstated qualification is the uncomfortable truth that double standards are inherent in international relations. The lack of a natural hierarchy of principles, the fact that principles can be both ends and means, and that there are many principles and not every principle can be reconciled with every other principle, makes impossible for any country with an active foreign policy to apply any principle, even one as fundamental as sovereignty, with perfect consistency.

The only way to be perfectly consistent in an imperfect world is never to do anything. Being passive carries its own risks; indeed for small countries, perhaps even greater risks. If you are going to do nothing it should be by deliberate choice and not because you allow yourself overwhelmed or intimidated by events or bigger countries.

Singapore is widely acknowledged internationally to have an excellent record in the UN. Generations of Singapore diplomats from pioneers like Tommy Koh and former foreign minister S. Jayakumar, down the years to the present incumbent, Burhan Gafoor, who **probably wasn't even born** when these veterans first served at the UN, have played active roles in, and made important contributions to, the UN.

Still, in a 1994 interview with Malaysian Business, General Tan Sri Hashim 'Freddie' Mohammed Ali, former chief of the Malaysian Armed Forces, claimed that then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had told him "if PAS comes to power ... and tries to meddle with the water in Johor Bahru, I'll move my troops in. I will not wait for the Security Council to solve this little problem." **Was the General's recollection accurate? Water from Johor was certainly a matter of life and death.**

Singapore took a strong and principled position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Almost forty years earlier, we voted in the UN against the almost farcical American invasion of tiny Grenada because the principle involved was deadly serious. For a decade during the 1980s, we played an active role in ASEAN to oppose the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of the country then known as Democratic Kampuchea in defense of the same principle.

But in 2003, Singapore joined the Multilateral Force-Iraq and sent servicemen, ships and aircraft to the Persian Gulf in support of the invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein and dismantled his regime. Singapore justified our participation with reference to UN Security Council resolutions requiring Iraq to give up weapons of mass destruction. This was true but a little disingenuous. The Security Council had not explicitly authorized the use of force against Iraq. In the event, it turned out that Saddam Hussein was only pretending to have such weapons. This was somewhat embarrassing, but entirely beside the point as far as Singapore was concerned.

Whether or not Iraq had weapons of mass destruction was never the main consideration for us.

It is very difficult to recapture the mood two decades ago after the 9/11 terrorist attacks for those that did not experience it. But I remember vividly that I had just returned home and was watching my children sleep when the MFA duty officer called to ask me to turn on CNN. I even remember the name of the officer on duty that evening. I turned on the television just in time to see the second jet fly into the World Trade Centre in New York. I rushed back to MFA. In the shock of the moment, nobody had remembered to activate crisis procedures. But every foreign service officer who was needed returned to MFA that night without being told. All of us understood that something fundamental had changed.

The US is a vitally important partner for Singapore. We have a close relationship with the US. But we are not an American ally and do not want to be an American ally. We do not expect the US to defend us. We only expect the US to sell us the advanced weapons a small country needs to deter larger countries and protect our sovereignty, and to maintain the overall regional balance of power within which our deterrence operates. The US is a key element of every balance everywhere, and in our region is an irreplaceable element.

So soon after 9/11, the US was not going to indulge us in any too-clever-by-half attempt to finesse our position or to be overly punctilious about Security Council procedures. After the most serious attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor,

the Americans were taking careful note of who stood with them and who did not. Had we not stepped up, something essential would have changed in the relationship and not for the better.

Two years after the invasion of Iraq, we concluded a Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security with the US. It has a clumsy title but is nevertheless a very important agreement for us. In short, our participation in the Iraq operation was based on a *realpolitik* calculation of interests in which Iraqi sovereignty was subordinated to the contingencies of the times.

Principles prescribe broad strategic directions. Foreign policy is the adaptation of principles to changing circumstances in order to further some interest. A policy is not just something to be hung on the wall and admired as a trophy of your own cleverness: it has to serve some purpose. If you are unable to, or do not intend to, implement it, what you have is not so much a policy as a posture or a policy of posturing.

There may well be good reasons to strike postures. For most countries that is in effect what happens most of the time when they vote in the UN on non-binding General Assembly resolutions, most of which are on subjects on which they have little substantive interest or knowledge and little if any capability or even intention to act. A General Assembly vote is not inconsequential but at best it is only a statement of position.

During the translation of principle to policy, it is often necessary to choose between irreconcilable principles, or accept that no matter how important a principle may be, it may have to be compromised or even sacrificed entirely. All countries confront this fact of international life.

For example, China is neuralgic about the principle of sovereignty and its collorary principles, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and respect for their territorial integrity. The reason for this can be summarized in three words: Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet. Chinese diplomats lose no opportunity to take countries to task for their alleged violations of these principles.

Recently, the new Chinese ambassador to Singapore told someone I know that she was disappointed that while Singapore **condemned Russia for violating Ukraine's sovereignty, we did not do the same for Nancy Pelosi's violation of China's sovereignty by her recent visit to Taiwan.** China, the ambassador reportedly said, would judge Singapore's 'friendship' by our consistency.

There can be no greater violation of sovereignty than the invasion of one country by another. But China has even refused to call the war in Ukraine a war. In the UN, China did **not vote in favor of the resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and instead abstained.** Abstaining was understandable given **China's interests.** But by insisting that Singapore should be consistent while ignoring China's own

inconsistency, the good ambassador was clearly operating in cahoots with our old friend, the Double Standard.

When she accused Singapore of inconstancy, **I don't think the** Chinese ambassador was primarily interested in defending the principle of sovereignty, even with regard to an issue as fundamental to China as Taiwan. She was more interested in using the principle to sow doubt **about Singapore's positions** on Ukraine and Taiwan in the expectation that the person who told me about the conversation would spread what she said more widely, and **I don't think** she only spoke to one person. **I don't blame her for** trying. In her place, I would have **done the same. But we shouldn't be naïve about what she** was really up to.

Some of you may think that I am arguing for moral relativism. That is incorrect. I do not think that moral relativism is a desirable ethical standard for an individual or a country. Explicit in the stress I have laid on what Mr. Rajaratnam called our essential values, is the idea that we ought to hold some values as absolute. In drawing attention to the inevitable inconsistency with which even fundamental principles are implemented, I am not making a normative argument, only a purely empirical observation that like its cousin, the double standard, moral relativism is inherent in the nature of international relations.

States are sovereign equals in theory but not in practice. The possibility of Russia being held accountable for Ukraine, China for Xinjiang, or the US for Iraq, in the same way that, for

example, Serbs have been tried for crimes committed during the Balkan wars of the 1990s or Africans for genocide in Rwanda, is just about zero. We may deplore this but our disapproval will not make any difference. The reality of inequality is even formally acknowledged by the UN Charter in the privilege of the veto given to the Permanent Members of the Security Council.

There is no need to be apologetic about the reality of moral relativism and double standards in diplomacy. It is entirely possible to be both a good diplomat and a good human being. I know many. But if you are an ethical perfectionist, it may be better for your own peace of mind to find a different job. There are many definitions of diplomacy and diplomats, some are very witty but few are complementary.

One of the better known definitions is that of Sir Henry Wotton, a 17th century English diplomat who while on a mission to a town in Germany, famously expressed the view that **“an ambassador is an honest man who is sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.”** What is less well known is that Sir Henry meant it as a joke, but the King he served, James I, heard about it and was not amused by the apparent cynicism of his ambassador and never employed him again.

I don't claim that diplomats never lie. That would itself be a lie. But good diplomats stick to the strict truth as far as possible because the most valuable coin of diplomacy is credibility. A diplomat who acquires a reputation for being unscrupulous is going to be ineffective. This is particularly

true for diplomats representing small countries. Whatever you may think of the policies that Sergey Lavrov or Wang Yi defend – and having worked with both, I admire their technical skills as diplomats **even if I don't think much of their countries'** policies – even bad policies of big countries have to be taken seriously. So whether you like it or not, you have to deal with their representatives. Not so for small countries.

Without principles, policy risks losing direction and drifting. Yet when principle is evoked, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether it is really the basis on which policy was made, or an aspiration, or only a justification of policy; all the more so because few **who think of themselves as 'statesmen'** – a grandiose term that betrays a lot about those who think of themselves in this way – can resist wrapping the mantle of moral rectitude around even the most banal of their actions. **I don't want to exaggerate the difficulties, only point out that** they exist and the exercise of choice is again needed, even if it is only the choice of whom to trust.

How to recognize the reality of moral relativism in international relations without devaluing all values and how to make compromises without losing credibility? Or to approach the issue from another perspective, how to prevent the inevitable inconsistencies of policy and diplomacy from instilling a sterile cynicism in the general public in which any action by any country is as good as any other action by any other country and the idea that some actions by other countries are not in our own interests is lost. Cynicism is the

close neighbour of gullibility. If you believe in nothing you can be made to believe in anything.

The answer, I think, does not lie in denying the inconsistencies. That would be counter-productive because sooner or later, they become evident even to the casual observer if only because someone – your enemies -- will draw attention to them. The answer lies in frankly acknowledging that inconsistencies will occur but getting the public to better understand that we have to take the world as it is and the nature of international relations is such that foreign policy and diplomacy cannot be justified by any ethically perfect criterion – a noble but impossible standard – but only by action and its effects on our own interests.

However ‘principled’ a policy claims to be -- our own policy or **any other country’s policy** -- we should not judge it on the basis of an ethic that condemns all compromises of principles however deplorable per se such compromises may be. Rather, one should adopt a utilitarian ethic which weighs any diplomatic action regardless of whether it entails a compromise of principle or, conversely, standing firm on principle, in terms of its effect on our interests that the action was intended to achieve.

The purpose of policy is action. Even a policy of deliberate non-action is an action of sorts. Did the action achieve the goal? Was the action chosen the best that circumstances permitted? Could the same end have been achieved at less cost to the integrity of the principle? Could it have been

achieved in a different way? Was the intended goal achievable by any means in the first place?

All these questions must be asked and answered with full understanding and acceptance of another uncomfortable truth. However morally unsatisfactory this may seem in the abstract, there is an important practical difference between private morality and public morality.

This was the central insight of Machiavelli which has drawn misplaced condemnation for centuries. The condemnation is misplaced because **Machiavelli's** argument is not for immorality or even amorality, but simply that in this vale of tears we call the world, you cannot do good only by being good. In international relations, virtue is seldom its own reward and often has to be helped along the way to its just reward.

For a leader or **diplomat representing his or her country's** interest, the difference between private morality and public morality is not just a reality that has to be reluctantly accepted, but something of a moral imperative in its own right. An individual who suffers for his or her own beliefs can **be admired. But if an individual representing a country's** interests, sacrifices those interests and makes the country suffer for his or her own beliefs, then he or she is being selfishly self-indulgent if not criminally negligent.

Of course, it is much easier for me, a pensioner, to talk about the necessity of policy based on a public utilitarian ethic than

it is for those still in practice to formulate and implement such policies, particularly in crisis situations when decisions have to be made on the fly, with imperfect or misleading information, against pressures of time, and when even clarity about goals can be elusive because different actors even if apparently working in concert on the same issue, do not necessarily have the same goals. This is particularly true in multilateral settings. **ASEAN's approach to Myanmar** can serve as an illustration of both what is possible and what can go wrong in such circumstances.

ASEAN was confronted with a crisis on 1st February 2021 when the Tatmadaw – the Burmese military – staged a coup against the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi. Trouble had been brewing for some time and the factors that led to the coup were complex. We should not assume that the victim is always guiltless and Aung San Suu Kyi herself must share considerable responsibility for the crisis. Still, a coup was clearly a violation of the ASEAN Charter and ASEAN obviously needed to take some action. But was it really obvious?

What had ASEAN done eight years earlier when the Thai military seized power from a civilian government? The answer is nothing of any consequence. That the Thai King subsequently endorsed the coup leader after the coup seems to me a very tenuous argument for the legitimacy of the **military's action**. Did a constitutional monarch really have the authority to retroactively wash away political sins? We are far

from the days when the mere laying of Royal hands was believed to cure a variety of ills.

If ASEAN took no effective action against the Thai coup in 2014, why was ASEAN – or at least the handful of foreign ministers who were more than usually passionate about the Myanmar coup -- pressing for action in 2021? What had changed in the intervening years? Was it just different personalities? Had some ASEAN foreign ministers been suddenly struck by the Holy Spirit of Constitutionalism? Or perhaps it was simply a case of Myanmar being less important to ASEAN than Thailand and so a heroic gesture could be made at relatively little cost?

Some of ASEAN's partners, particularly those from the West, certainly expected ASEAN to act. But compared to the pressures ASEAN had endured for 24 years from 1988 when the Tatmadaw brutally suppressed demonstrations and killed thousands, to 2012 when Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from house arrest and regulations eased to allow her to travel and successfully contest by-elections, the western pressures after the 2021 coup were mild; to my mind, barely noticeable.

The global geopolitical situation had significantly changed and the US and EU now had more urgent concerns than Myanmar. If they were asking ASEAN to act, I suspect that it was more to give themselves an alibi so they could get away with doing the minimum. Letting ASEAN take the lead is not always an expression of ASEAN centrality.

In the event, for whatever reason, ASEAN did act against Myanmar and did so quite swiftly. It would be tedious for me to recount every twist and turn of developments after February 2021. Suffice to say that it was fortunate that the ASEAN Chair was held then by Dato Erywan Yusof, **Brunei's** Second Foreign Minister. Dato Erywan is an experienced ASEAN hand who had come up through the ranks and knew **ASEAN's workings in a way that** many of his counterpart foreign ministers did not. After a series of consultations, he succeeded in convening a special summit of leaders on 24 April in Jakarta. This is light-speed in ASEAN time

The Summit agreed on 5 points to deal with the Myanmar coup:

- Immediate cessation of violence and all parties to exercise restraint;
- Constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people;
- A special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN;
- ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre; and

- The Special Envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.

Up to this point, ASEAN did very well. Given the differences of interests among its members, it was a near miracle to have achieved consensus. But to anyone with minimal familiarity with Myanmar, at least three of the five points were clearly only aspirational. If the Tatmadaw was an organization willing to exercise restraint, forswear violence, engage in dialogue with its political opponents, or allow an external party to mediate its relations with its political opponents, it would not have staged a coup in the first place.

The coup leader, Senior General Min Aung Hliang, attended the summit and had raised no objections to the 5 points. But Myanmar has been under military rule for most of its independent history. The odds that he would really comply, were always very long. It was nevertheless important for ASEAN to have established a baseline of principles of acceptable conduct for one its members. As I had earlier mentioned, it is sometimes legitimate to adopt a policy of posturing. It at least showed ASEAN doing something and thus preserved the appearance of ASEAN centrality.

But it was a mistake for ASEAN to have gone further to suspend the State Administration Council (SAC), which is what the military regime calls itself, from participation in ASEAN meetings. ASEAN insisted that until the SAC complied with the 5 points, Myanmar could only be represented by a **‘non-political representative’**. The idea of a **‘non-political**

representative’ is a contradiction in terms because even if Myanmar had been represented by an office-boy, that could not have happened without the SAC’s approval and the office-boy would thus have been ‘political’.

Suspension was a step too far. ASEAN has neither effective **carrots nor effective sticks to influence the Tatmadaw’s** behaviour. It can only try to influence the Tatmadaw by talking to it. It was never going to be easy to change the **Tatmadaw’s** behaviour. But by refusing to engage the real power in Myanmar until the SAC fulfilled conditions that it never realistically could be expected to fulfil, the prospect of influence is now practically non-existent. Why should the SAC listen to an ASEAN that has shunned it?

In essence, ASEAN got on a high moral horse with no effective plan for getting off it, and thus ceded the initiative to the Tatmadaw, marginalizing itself. What happens next in Myanmar almost entirely depends on the Tatmadaw. What centrality does ASEAN now have on Myanmar? ASEAN – or at least a handful of foreign ministers -- compounded the mistake by criticizing Prime Minister **Hun Sen’s bilateral visit** to Myanmar while Cambodia was Chair of ASEAN. This shut down a potential way out of the impasse.

ASEAN’s policy on Myanmar is a salutary lesson in the perils of diplomacy getting swept away by emotion or rigid adherence to principle. From 1988 to the early 2000s, ASEAN criticised the West for adopting an inflexible ideological approach and refusing to engage the military regime of the

time. ASEAN has now adopted that same failed western policy.

I do not have time to discuss the reasons for this, but let me point out that while Myanmar is perhaps in itself not of great geopolitical significance – a humanitarian tragedy is not always geopolitically consequential -- if the lack of clinical realism that has contaminated **ASEAN's Myanmar** policy continues and becomes entrenched – and the decision to admit Timor Leste as a new member is perhaps a symptom of this -- this could have significant adverse implications for **ASEAN's ability to deal** with the far more crucial issue of US-China strategic competition. More than any other issue, dealing with US-China competition requires hard-headed realism and clinical calculation of interests.

US-China competition is now a structural feature of international relations that is not going away. It is, however, **not a 'new Cold War' as the intellectually lazy** have labeled it. That trope fundamentally misrepresents the nature of US-China competition which is far more complex than US-Soviet rivalry ever was, does not present unambiguous choices, is unlikely to end in any clear dénouement, and hence requires far greater agility and pragmatism to successfully navigate if the countries of Southeast Asia are to preserve the agency to determine their own futures.

ASEAN does not claim to take a common position on every issue. Still, the approach it has adopted on Myanmar may lead to a serious split within ASEAN. The two member states that

share a border with Myanmar – Thailand and Laos – cannot afford to merely strike postures indefinitely. Geography gives them concrete concerns that those members that played the leading role in shaping ASEAN policy on Myanmar – Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore – do not have. The concerns of these three countries may be serious, but they are abstract. Posturing is largely costless to these three countries; not so for Thailand and Laos.

Sooner or later Thailand and Laos will go – must go – their own way to secure their interests. In all probability, when they do so, they will be followed by Vietnam and Cambodia, **neither of whom is enthusiastic about ASEAN's approach** towards Myanmar, even though so far they have gone along with it. This potential split between mainland and maritime ASEAN members over Myanmar could catalyze other incipient fault-lines with profound consequences for Southeast Asia.

Let me wind up by elaborating on four sentences that encapsulate what I have been trying to convey. They are:

- Contradictions and therefore choices are inescapable in international relations;
- Choice requires the exercise of pragmatic judgement;
- Judgement requires the exercise of agency; and
- The exercise of agency requires the acceptance of risk.

For Singapore, the crucial choices, judgements and risks are essentially domestic political challenges not foreign policy challenges. If we can deal with the domestic challenges, we can manage the complications of our external environment.

Speaking in the Singapore Legislative Assembly on 5th March **1957, Lee Kuan Yew said: “In the context of the second half of the 20th century Southeast Asia, island nations are a political joke.” He made the statement during a debate on the Constitutional Talks in London and his conviction that merger with Malaya was the only practical way forward. Of course, as we now all know, merger did not work out.**

What made contemporary Singapore can be understood only if the elder **Mr. Lee’s 1957 statement is read alongside other statements by him and other first-generation leaders. Speaking to Dennis Bloodworth, a British journalist who settled in Singapore, about the PAP’s struggles against the CCP supported United Front, Mr. Lee said “Some mug had to do it”. Dr. Goh Keng Swee echoed the sentiment: “It was an act of reckless folly ... We were five foolish young men and we walked right into it.”**

The 1957 statement was deterministic in tone; the subsequent statements quoted by Dennis Bloodworth stressed agency and choice, cloaked in self-deprecating irony. The range of foreign policy options, indeed the range of options in any policy domain, for a small city-state are never

broad. But small countries are also never entirely without agency.

Exercise of agency is the real point of the self-deprecating statements by Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee quoted by Dennis Bloodworth. As the elder Mr. Lee, again quoted by **Bloodworth, explained: “We wanted the British out ... we believed nationalism to be a more potent force than communism, we pressed on regardless of the horrendous risks.”**

The same spirit with which they faced the communist United Front, infused the way our first generation leaders faced the very bleak prospect that confronted Singapore after Separation. Our circumstances then were far more dire and complicated than anything we face today.

Our first-generation leaders were practitioners not theoreticians. But they were widely read and must have known of **Thucydides’ too often quoted dictum: The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.** As practitioners, they must, however, have regarded it as at best only partially true. **If after 1965 they ‘suffered what they must’**, Singapore as we know it today would not exist.

After having had independence thrust upon us for the sake of **the ‘essential values’ that Mr. Rajaratnam spoke about**, they had to make those values work in the most daunting of circumstances. And rather than meekly suffer what the Malaysian leadership of those days thought they must suffer,

make it work they did by convincing Singaporeans that it could work. That is political leadership.

Thucydides represents crude realism. Our first-generation leaders were realists, but not crude realists. They understood that crude realism is sometimes not very realistic. Of course, any exercise of agency entails risk. But realism does not mean only avoiding danger. Sometimes the biggest risk is to try and avoid all risks. We should not be paralyzed by the possibility of risk. Fatalism is fatal to small states.

Acceptance of risk is not recklessness. The exercise of agency therefore requires judgement which is composed of the rejection of fatalism coupled with a grasp of complexity and an appreciation of what is realistically achievable in any particular situation, guided by a deep understanding our interests. The kind of situation ASEAN has gotten itself into in Myanmar is an unacceptable risk because we lost sight of what is core and what is peripheral to our interests.

Myanmar was an unforced error. But the essential purpose of influence operations is to instill a sense of powerlessness that erodes the will to exercise agency in defense of our own interests. If we allow ourselves to be bribed or persuaded into believing that History is moving in a particular direction – **whether its arc is tending towards ‘Democracy’ as defined by the West or whether ‘The East is Rising, the West Declining – why resist? Better to hitch our wagon to History’s locomotive.**

Neither idea is entirely without some basis; both are gross simplifications that distort complex realities. History has no particular direction that is not set by the inter-play of human volitions. Educating voters at the grassroots in the complexities of that dynamic and keeping their faith in our own ability to determine the direction of our own history, is the crucial political task.

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