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LEE KUAN YEW

MASTER BUILDER OF SINGAPORE

Core Course I Essay

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INTRODUCTION

Some nation states are born out of revolution. Others arise through conquest or post-war partition of larger states by victors. Few, however, have independence forced upon them as Singapore did. On August 9, 1965, after several stormy years attempting to integrate in a post-colonial federation, it was unexpectedly expelled from Malaysia. Fortunately for Singapore, it was led by Lee Kuan Yew.

His remarkable success in establishing a stable government and transforming Singapore into a regional economic powerhouse has made the "Singapore Model" one of the most closely studied patterns among developing nations. Singapore enjoyed sustained growth and political stability during a period when other regional states experienced much turbulence. An economic peer of Chile, Argentina, and Mexico thirty years ago, its per capita GNP is over four times theirs today.¹ Its attainments have been so stunning that some have suggested that Singapore may eclipse Hong Kong as the leading trading center in Asia in the future.

Yet despite its success, Lee's Singapore has been widely criticized for the sacrifice of civil liberties which accompanied its progress. Lee's authoritarian style and the unsavory racial and eugenic overtones of some of his policies trouble many observers and may limit the applicability of Singapore's successes to other countries.

Whether worthy of emulation or not, both critics and supporters acknowledge Lee's crucial role in the outcome. Singapore's success was by no means inevitable. The challenges facing the new nation were so daunting, its success so spectacular, and his imprint so pervasive, that Singapore's flourishing economy and stable polity are unquestionably attributable to Lee's personal leadership. He has been actively involved in nearly every major decision affecting Singapore's development. He devised the grand strategy, set short and long term goals, identified threats, developed plans, and oversaw their implementation. He was philosopher, architect, and builder of the new nation. Thus, to understand the emergence of Singapore, one must understand Lee Kuan Yew.

This paper begins by discussing his background and approach to statecraft. Next it examines Singapore's national interests as Lee saw them, including threats he perceived, goals he set, and how he matched his limited resources to those goals through his policies. Finally, it touches on some undesirable effects of his policies.

PROFILE OF LEE KUAN YEW

Lee Kuan Yew's personality is complex and eclectic, and it integrates his values and the elements of his background in a highly rational and consistent fashion. Above all, Lee is a realist—analytic, calculating, and pragmatic. He looks to technology and intellect to find solutions to problems, yet this faith is tempered by an

understanding of psychology and politics with all their inherent irrationality. He blends the theoretical and the practical, the rational and irrational, in his assessment of what is desirable and what is possible, matching ends to means. In this context, Lee is visionary, but his "visions" must still make sense. In Lee Kuan Yew's economy of values, even ideals are judged by their utility.

Lee is an exceptionally brilliant man who knows it. His intellectual self-confidence frees him to adjust social theories or meld them with concepts from other disciplines to suit Singapore's unique situation. His power, past success, and control of the media insulate him from many of the political consequences of criticism. Thus, he is free to modify his plans and his underlying theoretical approach to problems whenever accumulating evidence dictates a change. That is also why he is often so frank and impolitic, he is in control and has no reason to hide behind politically correct euphemisms.² His candor is not meant to shock, but to inform.

Unfortunately, this conviction of his own intellectual superiority has also "liberated" him from the need to ask the people what they want, since he and his elites know what is best for them. It manifests itself in contempt for the opinions of others he regards as less qualified, unwillingness to consider the validity of critiques of his policies, and callous impatience with those who do not agree with him. He generally regards dissent as a function of intellectual, cultural, or moral inferiority, deliberate obtuseness, or outright rebellion. For example, after Lee established the Immersion Scheme to train the top 8% of students in special schools, he spoke to some educators to present his plan. "I am trying to explain why this policy is right," he said. "If you are convinced [then] implement it. The alternative is to weed out those who disagree and install people who agree."³ Concerning others who questioned its wisdom, he said, "I cannot allow them to hold up the rescue operation."⁴

Lee bends knowledge and people to his own purposes, but what are those ends? Lee himself defined his principal aim in his 1973 New Year's message when he said, "The greatest satisfaction in life comes from achievement. To achieve is to be happy."⁵ Lee feels that his area of achievement lies in creating a stable, well ordered society where "everyone can have the maximum enjoyment of his freedoms."⁶

His values are an amalgam of relativism and idealism. His experience under the Japanese occupation and subsequent struggles against the communist party taught him the imperative of realpolitik. This is moderated by some traditional values. Lee holds to the superiority of Confucianism over Western values, and has a deep sense of duty, responsibility, integrity, and self-control. Yet even these are held not because they are true, but because they are needful to a well ordered society. Because of their utility, he is willing to treat them as absolutes.

Lee's altruistic vision and purpose of achievement have shaped his use of power and prevented its corruption and degeneration into a despotic thirst for control. His power, while sometimes harshly applied, has generally been used according to the outlines of his principles and in a relatively selfless fashion. That has not necessarily made it "kinder and gentler." He is ruthless to adversaries, unpitying, and indifferent to the sensitivities of those he considers his inferiors, especially in the realm of social planning and political activity. His social Darwinist beliefs have created a meritocracy which has left many of the weak behind. Yet, he has not acted out of malice. For him, power and control are amassed and protected for their usefulness in implementing the policies he deems best for his people. Even the grooming of his own son as his replacement springs more from concerns about the endurance of his work than from nepotism since, for Lee Kuan Yew, lasting accomplishment is the ultimate measure of success.

Whatever his motivation, Lee has applied his power with great insight to the challenges Singapore faced in its early years. We now turn to those threats.

RESOURCES, INTERESTS, GOALS, AND POLICIES LEE'S STATECRAFT

In 1965, Singapore's *resources* were limited but significant: *strategic geographic location*, a large Chinese *population* with a *stabilizing culture* that valued hard work, self-reliance, and social conformity, and near-monopolistic *political control* by his Peoples' Action Party (PAP) which would facilitate rapid implementation of his programs. By his keen application of all instruments of statecraft, Lee maximized the value of these assets for meeting Singapore's many challenges. Lee constructed his grand strategy around *three principal national interests: survival, security, and stability*. He felt that each of those interests could be met by achieving the *parallel goals of economic growth, regional cooperation, and domestic order*.

Goal 1 Economic Growth

In 1965, the *greatest threat* to Singapore's national survival lay in her *dependency on Malaysia*. Only three years before, a United Nations committee opined that an independent Singapore would not be viable because of its reliance on its former federation partner for trade, water, and other essentials.⁷ External threats were secondary to the more immediate imperative of economic survival. In Lee's eyes, failure to develop the economy would cause domestic unrest and make Singapore more susceptible to insurgency and foreign domination. Therefore, Lee's *first goal* was to *develop economic independence and growth* by diversifying business activities and broadening trading partners.

Lee chose to follow a form of *guided economy* which was neither socialist nor capitalist. Under this form, the government planned and supervised economic development, improved the economic infrastructure to attract foreign investors, encouraged industry through tax breaks and other incentives, established pro-business regulations, fostered education and training in needed skills, and provided direct government support, investment, and participation in development of key industries such as banking, shipping, and refining. The government also kept inflation low and held down wages, even after full employment was achieved in the early 1970s⁸, while restrictive labor laws minimized strikes and labor unrest. The government laid down policies which encouraged savings and investment, and raised local capital through mandatory participation in the Central Provident Fund. This ensured that Singaporeans would own a substantial portion of their rapidly expanding economy. With appropriate government guidance and encouragement, Lee thought that the free enterprise system would power the economic transformation of Singapore.⁹

Given Lee's background, it is not surprising that *education* was a key tool of efforts to guide the economy. In the early days of independence, it consumed nearly one third of the national budget. The education system was modified to enhance the utility of the workforce to foreign investors. Before independence, the government had expanded the low-end jobs to absorb a large pool of unemployed low-skill workers. Lee's government expanded training in key vocational areas needed to support its expansion of certain industries. Early aptitude testing was used to fit each person on the "talent pyramid" and train them to fill a place on the "expertise pyramid".¹⁰ Lee arrested a perceived brain drain by imposing heavy costs on parents who educated their children abroad. A meritocracy was established where the brightest students were given generous scholarships and opportunities, while others were encouraged by various incentives to find their place in society.¹¹

Land, water, and housing continued to be potentially serious vulnerabilities. The government instituted an ambitious program of land *reclamation* and reprogrammed current use of land to fit into long term plans. This included a significant increase in water catchment areas to reduce dependence on Malaysia. Mass transit was vastly expanded and strict vehicle import limits were set to reduce the burden on the road infrastructure.

Lee's government made a conscious decision to forgo any attempt at agricultural independence and instead focused land use on construction of government *housing*. This was built in locations which distributed the population closer to developing areas and away from congested ones. By selling government-constructed homes to the residents, Lee encouraged owner interest, reduced upkeep costs, and returned capital to the government for

reinvestment in other programs. By 1980, 70% of Singaporeans owned their homes. Additionally, movement of large segments of the population into government housing projects broke up traditional neighborhoods, reducing ethnic insularity and increasing the role of the national government in the lives of most Singaporeans.

Lee was concerned that Singapore's *population* would expand faster than the economy and infrastructure could grow to absorb it. He set a long term maximum population goal of four million and offered government sterilization programs, legalized abortion, and educational and job incentives to families who limited their size. Those who did not were penalized by loss of educational preference, curtailment of medical benefits, and other costs, including pressure from government campaigns. Singapore's population control program, while successful in reducing birth rates, was controversial because of Lee's proposals for disincentives to limit families of the poor and unintelligent and encouragement of the elite and well-educated to have more children.

His efforts to build a sound economy while developing Singapore's infrastructure were very successful. Yet, they owe much of their success to Lee's international diplomacy which permitted internal development.

Goal 2 Regional Cooperation

Lee's diplomacy emphasized *non-alignment* and cooperation. His first challenge was to maintain critical links to Malaysia while developing economic ties with other nations. This was complicated by residual strain from Singapore's expulsion and by tensions with both Moslem neighbors, Indonesia and Malaysia, uneasy with the ethnically-Chinese city-state which lay between them. He skillfully played Malaysian and Indonesian interests against each other, and portrayed Singapore as an economic partner rather than competitor. By developing complementary industries and mutually favorable trade agreements, he increased interdependence, cementing relations with several highly successful diplomatic trips.

Lee's diplomatic maneuvering for economic development was further complicated by Singapore's *military security* problems. England initially agreed to keep her security forces in Singapore after independence, permitting concentration of national resources towards economic development during the first years of Singapore's independence. When Britain indicated it would pull out and then accelerated its withdrawal timetable, Lee traveled to England and successfully appealed for a delay. This gave Singapore time to develop its own armed forces which it did primarily through *national service*. After resolving some problems with its Moslem neighbors over its use of Israeli advisors, Singapore established a defense force adequate to replace the British umbrella while maintaining a non-alignment which preserved its freedom to expand economically.

Several factors reduced China's potentially disruptive role. The British, who had successfully neutralized an earlier communist insurgency in Malaysia, provided a sense of security until they left. Also, during this period, China's ventures in Tibet and Southeast Asia distracted it from a major effort in the area. Then, after the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia signalled a rapid decline of U.S. influence, Lee went to China to reaffirm his non-aligned status. By then, China had begun moving towards limited market participation and was looking toward Hong Kong's return in 1997. Since then, its competition has become more economic than political.

Goal 3 Domestic Order and Control

A stable society was critical to Singapore's economic development. Although the dominant Chinese culture provided stabilizing values, the existence of many different ethnic groups with divergent and potentially divisive cultural backgrounds posed a threat to national unity. As initial hopes for reunification with Malaysia faded, it became clear that Singapore needed to develop a sense of its own national identity.

Lee permitted some cultural diversity and publicly praised certain positive aspects of each culture, all the while rewarding conformity to national values. He encouraged the more benign aspects of ethnic culture, but expunged the political manifestations of ethnic singularity. These latter he regarded as divisive to the overall community and the national goal of developing a Singaporean identity. Activist nationalistic organizations were systematically pushed off the political stage by various means such as government harassment, denial of funds, investigation of the finances of the organization and its leaders, criminal prosecution for minor offenses, and libel suits with heavy fines against its leaders.

A shared language would strengthen national unity, yet here Lee showed restraint and flexibility. While he valued Chinese culture for its values, he recognized the importance of the English language for Singapore's economic growth. But rather than attempt to legislate a solution, Lee engineered incentives and costs related to specific economic and educational outcomes and allowed the "free market" of choice to bring about change, thus avoiding a potentially divisive domestic issue.

Lee controlled opposition political organizations, the press, and student protesters with the same tools he used to control ethnic groups. Particularly annoying critics were silenced with harassing criminal or civil proceedings. Publications had to be re-certified annually, and more troublesome ones were shut down by pressing financial institutions to foreclose on them. Excessively activist students lost government scholarships and grants, organizers were imprisoned, and foreign student protesters were simply expelled. By carefully using

the full spectrum of such direct and indirect instruments to intimidate, moderate, or silence opposition, the government effectively controlled political dissent without creating a large number of martyrs

The key factor underlying the successful control of these groups was the near-monopoly of political power enjoyed by Lee's Peoples' Action Party (PAP). Having already emerged as the dominant political force by 1965, the PAP consolidated its position over the years in several ways. Though defamed for suppression of opposition, most of its power was derived in more conventional ways. The PAP expanded its influence through patronage and administration of government facilities and programs ranging from court appointments to running kindergartens and housing offices. This, coupled with its grass-roots political organization, enabled it to stay in touch with most citizens, though the communication was often one way. Lee's clear, persuasive articulation and fierce defense of his programs also won wide support, while the broad success of his economic programs usually reduced the opposition to issues commanding a narrow constituency. As the Party's power grew, Lee demonstrated adroitness at manipulating legislation which would have restricted its power. As a result, in time, the PAP became identified with the state due to its dominance and influence.

The negative impact of this control is clear. *Restricted freedom* of speech and the press resulted in muted opposition, inadequate dialogue on some issues, and a sterile intellectual atmosphere. Many innocent individuals were unjustly harassed and even jailed at the government's behest. Yet most Singaporeans felt that individual civil liberties in the U.S. model were not as vital to the nation as establishing and maintaining social unity and order, especially in light of the disorder faced by other regional countries. There was broad consensus that individuals must subordinate their welfare to that of the group, be it family or nation.

Another problem has only recently received attention. Singapore has just begun mandatory moral and religious training to compensate for a *loss of cultural values*. This plunge into moral education is based on pragmatic concerns. Lee worries that "unless they have solid values they could waste their money. They will not bring up their children properly. Sooner or later, society will degenerate."¹² He adds, "The place of culture and religion is to serve the state, to affirm and validate values the state is not yet strong enough to evoke in its own right."¹³ If that is so, they cannot fulfil their function, since the strength of a moral idea lies in its claim to truth. Here, Lee's candor betrays him, for in advocating "moral education" purely on the basis of its utilitarian value, he undermines its claim to transcendence. Having subordinated ethnic and religious vitality to national order and unity, Lee has made prosperity the new "opiate of the people." Without some relaxation of

restriction on the "inner-freedoms," Lee's efforts to moralize his people are doomed to fail. As Minchin aptly notes, "It is puzzling that a Prime Minister so concerned to improve productivity and intelligence to their utmost should have paid so little attention to those elements of nurture most likely to achieve his heart's desire."¹⁴

Nonetheless, the firm controls have had their desired impact on reducing tensions between ethnic and political groups. The relative absence of a vigorous opposition gave the government the political stability and time it needed to implement and carry through long-range projects without socially divisive in-fighting. The PAP was able to dedicate its resources to making its policies work, rather than overcoming roadblocks set up by an opposition party. It was also able to inculcate a generation of Singaporeans with the evolving image of Singaporean identity. Most importantly, Singapore has been able to retain a single government in power for over thirty years, one with a singularly clear and consistent view of its goals and policies. This provided the stable economic and social environment for Singapore to establish itself as a viable national entity without being wracked by ethnic, religious, and political strife which many feared would hobble the new country. Steady application of prudent government economic policies, fed by the foreign investment which flowed in during those years, has sustained Singapore's economic expansion and strengthened its position for the future.

CONCLUSION

Statecraft is more than the dry application of means to ends or formulation of solutions to problems. It involves the highly personal interaction of a leader with all individuals, groups, and nations involved in the problems he faces. Lee's statecraft displayed the full spectrum of "soft" techniques from pure persuasion to economic coercion, applied with a clear but realistic vision of what could and ought to be done for Singapore.

Under Lee, Singapore has become a success by nearly every common measure: economic prosperity, national stability and unity, and international stature. Barring international economic upheaval, Singapore should remain strong, for its roots are deep. After thirty years, Lee has left his mark on nearly every major institution in Singapore. His "model" has become a political habit, a complex, highly rational approach for integrating all national problems, economic, social, and political, and developing comprehensive solutions.

Of course, problems remain, such as freedom of expression and cultural dilution. But Lee could not be expected to overcome all Singapore's challenges without creating others. It remains for Singapore to work those out after he moves off the stage. Whatever history's judgment, Lee Kuan Yew, always more concerned with getting results than getting credit, probably won't mind, just as long as Singapore's future is as bright as its past.

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3. James Minchin, No Man Is an Island (London: Allen & Unwin, 1990) 260.
4. Ibid.
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