

***Reassessing Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought.* By Ang Cheng Guan. Abington, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2023. Hardcover: 175pp.**

To mark the centenary of the birth of the late Lee Kuan Yew, this book collates examples of his strategic thinking, especially on foreign policy, in a manner that is supposedly intended to celebrate the wisdom of Singapore's "founding father". Lee, who is widely regarded as the architect of Singaporean foreign policy, served as the city-state's prime minister from June 1959, when the British colonial authorities granted it a degree of self-government, until his resignation in November 1990. He subsequently served as a senior minister until August 2004 and then as a minister mentor until May 2011. His son, Lee Hsien Loong, is the current prime minister of Singapore.

As well as an introduction and short conclusion, *Reassessing Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought* is composed of five substantive chapters. The first three cover the Cold War years while the final two focus on the post-1989 era. According to Ang Cheng Guan, opinions about Lee can be divided into two schools of thought: a panegyric school and a critical school. This dichotomy is unsurprising; Lee was a politician who triggered strong, often polarizing, emotions. His admirers praised him as a politician of great foresight, the man responsible for Singapore's meteoric rise. For his detractors, however, he was head of an "authoritarian" government that pursued elitist policies, although the author does not include some of his critics' more reproving comments.

For source material, the book draws on Lee's writings, public speeches and interviews he gave to eminent journalists between 1950 and 2011, the year Lee retired from politics before his passing four years later. According to Ang, he produced this book to flesh out the manner of Lee's strategic thinking and to serve as a conduit for the politician's thoughts. However, this means that he offers little assessment of the source material.

Nonetheless, the collation of Lee's own words provides key insights into the early challenges that faced Malaya (a precursor to Malaysia and which included Singapore) as well as independent Singapore during the Cold War period. For example, from his words, we can learn that Lee perceived communalism and communism as the two main security threats. Yet, he felt the former was more

dangerous as there was “no Malay-led Malayan Communist Party” (p. 37). The Malayan Communist Party was dominated by ethnic Chinese, which made Lee, who himself was ethnic Chinese, fear being misconstrued as chauvinistic. This was also a reason why Singapore was the last country in Southeast Asia to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1990 despite Lee’s view that bilateral relations would be “absolutely inevitable” (p. 48).

On the question of great power engagement in Southeast Asia, the book explores how Lee framed his desire to maintain a balance between them (p. 49). During the early period of his political career, he was more inclined towards the United Kingdom since he regarded Singapore’s reliance on the British Commonwealth, which it joined after its independence in 1965, as essential for its security (p. 52). Conversely, he believed US administrations of the time “lacked depth” in comparison to the British (p. 53). Lee was clearly disillusioned with the American defeat and withdrawal from Vietnam (p. 60). Nonetheless, he regularly called on the United States to remain engaged in Southeast Asia so as to provide a balance against the Soviet Union and China (pp. 104–15). According to Lee, US engagement was essential for upholding international law and order in East Asia in the later years of the twentieth century (p. 117).

Perhaps of interest to readers concerned about present-day issues will be Lee’s opinions about how the United States would want to maintain its dominant position internationally in the twenty-first century in the face of a rising China (p. 134). They might also be interested in his thoughts about the rise of India and China, and how this constituted the greatest strategic challenge to the United States (p. 145). According to Lee, a balanced relationship between China, Japan and the United States would provide Singapore the space to exist peacefully and grow its economy.

*Reassessing Lee Kuan Yew’s Strategic Thought* is well-researched and carefully documents how Lee’s mindset shaped Singapore’s foreign policy principles. In doing so it also identifies how his thought process evolved over time. Although Lee was known for his shrewd use of speeches and interviews to further Singapore’s national interest, many of his writings and utterances included in this book are retrospectives and therefore have to be treated critically.

In many ways, this book should be read as one intended to celebrate Lee's intuitive faculties and sharp foresight. In his short conclusion, for instance, Ang gives credit to Lee as a politician with a rare understanding of history, an assertion that historian Wang Gungwu and diplomat Chan Heng Chee are cited as confirming. The book will interest academics and policymakers keen to understand Lee's strategic outlook and philosophy, which continue to inform Singapore's foreign policy today.

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