

***Realism and Interdependence in Singapore's Foreign Policy.* By N. Ganesan. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. Hardcover: 179 pp.**

This book forms part of the “Politics in Asia” series formerly edited by Michael Leifer with an impressive and long list of previous publications. The present volume by N. Ganesan deals with Singapore’s foreign policy since the birth of the republic in 1965. It falls naturally into six main parts even if the book itself does not use this procedure in its organization. Part one deals in general terms with international relations theories and small states (Chapter 1), and the organizational set-up of Singapore’s foreign policy focusing on Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Chapter 2). Part two describes Singapore’s foreign policy in the two decades immediately following independence in 1965 within the context of the Cold War, and how that ideological framework of bipolarity defined and shaped the republic’s foreign policy orientation (Chapters 3 and 4). Part three offers an analysis of Singapore’s relations with its two neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia (Chapters 5 and 6), while part five addresses economic and defence policies (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 is the conclusion.

The book is well organized and well researched — and many readers will appreciate the almost meticulous work that went into the preparation of appendices, which are very informative and useful to the general reader, especially if he is interested in understanding Singapore’s foreign policy. The author is comfortable in his general analysis and is not given to jumping to conclusions. He knows his subject and writes on a solid foundation of documented facts.

In his short introduction the author categorically states that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. He is to be commended for doing so. Many foreign policy analysts forget what the former speaker of the US House of Representatives, Tip O’Neil, once so unequivocally stated: “all politics are local”. This dictum applies as much to Singapore as it does to the United States. The author argues:

Singapore’s existence and success derive in part from the PAP’s success in the domestic political arena and in part from skilful management of a well-defined foreign policy with clearly identifiable goals and issues. A clear core of realist self-reliance is layered with the domestic demands of a competitive trading state that requires a liberal international trading regime. (p. 2)

This is a very succinct observation of Singapore’s foreign policy.

The chapters on Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs are interesting as is the chapter on the early days of the country. Once more it is brought to the attention of the reader how vulnerable Singapore was in its early days and how precarious the situation was or might have turned out to be if circumstances had been a bit different. The sensitive issues of seceding from Malaysia and the uncertainties of whether Malaysia would contemplate untoward measures, as well as the uncertainties arising from Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* under then President Soekarno are described and analysed with a high degree of objectivity, which does credit to the author.

The same goes for the chapter on Singapore's Cold War and post-Cold War policy output. There is much to learn for people not having lived during these sometimes nerve-racking years characterized by an unpredictable and threatening political climate. It was difficult to know who your enemy could be, how reliable your partners and allies were — and the American withdrawal from Vietnam followed a few years later by the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia cast a long shadow of non-transparency over foreign policy. Decisions that now look seemingly straightforward were at that time extremely difficult and would have put the nation's survival at stake if policy-makers got them wrong. For a small and newborn nation-state like Singapore these were dangerous waters to navigate in, but as the book shows, the navigators were up to the task and got it right.

The two chapters on Singapore's relations with Malaysia and Indonesia are useful reading as they provide a fine introduction to bilateral relations between these three countries over a considerable time span. The author has done a good job but does not really provide new perspectives. The core of the book — and its strength — is revealed in Chapter 7 (Economic and Defence Policies) and Chapter 8 (Conclusion).

The author makes a key observation on the political economy of Singapore's foreign policy on page 23:

Although Singapore eventually resorted to signing Free Trade Arrangements (FTAs) with its major trading partners on a bilateral basis from 2000, it was a recourse borne out of frustration at the non-fulfilment of the terms of AFTA and APEC rather than a return to state-centric realism. The 1997 Asian financial crisis significantly weakened regional multilateral institutions and made states more inward-looking to attend to immediate domestic matters. Neither the crisis nor its fall-out was of Singapore's making. In this regard, the recourse to FTAs was a responsive rather than a deliberate one.

A similar point is also made in page 55 on the rationale behind the republic's imperative to reassess its commitment to multilateralism, and to proceed negotiating FTAs with its major trading partners. This opens the door for a substantial discussion as to whether it is in the interest of a country like Singapore to pursue multilateralism, combine multilateralism with bilateralism, or build up a bilateral network as a substitute for multilateralism, or as a safety net in case multilateralism does not work as envisaged. For Singapore this is the vital and crucial decision. Can Singapore rely on the multilateral system established since 1945 to guarantee its security and independence, and safeguard its access to markets abroad and its place as a transport, logistic and intellectual hub — all of which are indispensable to its economic survival?

It is a pity that the author approaches this question in the two concluding chapters but does not really enter into a discussion of what is probably the central issue for Singapore's foreign policy in the coming years. Perhaps the author has taken the stance that the book should limit itself to the analysis of Singapore's foreign policy up to the beginning of this decade. Even if that were the case, the reader is left wondering why issues such as Singapore's membership in the United Nations and its stint as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council is not highlighted and discussed. What did it mean for Singapore's foreign policy to sit in the Security Council? What were the pros and cons for taking this jump and how did Singapore feel about its performance in the context of its own foreign policy priorities? In the same vein the author might have done well to discuss Singapore's scepticism against involvement in UN peacekeeping operations and how the attitude has developed or rather changed during the years. In short, it would have been interesting to read an analysis of Singapore's dilemma when deciding between bilateral or multilateral foreign policy and to know in what direction the wind blows as judged by an expert who has devoted considerable time analysing Singapore's foreign policy. Other interesting topics that could have been discussed in the book include Singapore's active multilateral diplomacy in ASEM, APEC, and the initiative on the Asia-Middle East Dialogue and Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation.

The author's definition of foreign policy appears to be a bit too circumscribed. Many readers would have liked a more in-depth analysis of Singapore's foreign policy vis-à-vis China and the United States. Can various concerns be reconciled, does Singapore have to choose, and what reactions can be expected from China and the United States? Looking at developments in recent years, Singapore's foreign policy

towards Australia might also have been worthy of consideration in this volume.

This is in many respects a splendid book as far as it goes, and the author's credentials are impeccable. N. Ganesan acquits himself well from the task within his own terms of reference. The weakness is that he stops precisely at the point where the subject gets really hot and interesting. Perhaps he would do us the favour of following up with a revised edition that covers a wider scope and delves deeper.

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