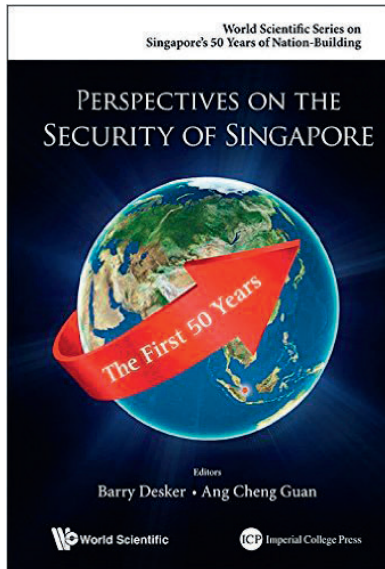


Book Review



Barry Desker and Ang Cheng Guan (Eds.), *Perspectives on the Security of Singapore*, (Singapore: World Scientific), 2015, 329 pages

By **MAJ Phua Chao Rong, Charles**

Perspectives on the Security of Singapore deserves to be the 101 reading for all SAF personnel, regardless of service, vocation, and citizen-soldiers inclusive. In a relatively short volume of 300 pages, it articulates the purpose of the SAF, our history, security context and challenges in 14 substantive chapters. In the final four chapters, it captures insights from our local defence and security pioneers featuring specifically former President S. R. Nathan, former Head, Civil Service and long-time Permanent Secretary (Defence), Mr Peter Ho, former Permanent Secretary (Foreign Affairs), Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan and former Permanent Secretary for Defence Research, Technology and Logistics, Mr Philip Yeo.

TOTAL DEFENCE AS INSURANCE FOR PEACE AND PROSPERITY

Eminent local historian Ang Cheng Guan's first chapter gives a broad overview of the key themes

in this book and several of them are noteworthy.¹ Setting our historical context in the founding of Singapore in 1965, defence and foreign affairs were "closely inter-related subjects" in which "foreign policy choices determine defence commitments which in turn limit the range of options of Singapore's foreign policy."² The importance of defence as the foundation of Singapore's survival and prosperity was well articulated by Mr Lim Kim San (who took over from Dr Goh Keng Swee as Defence Minister) in 1968, who said "without this defence build-up, there may come a time when all the economic growth in the world will not stand us in good stead, because we would be captured and it would be too late to regret that we should have given priority to our defence build-up first."³ The wisdom of this statement still rings true today and explains why our defence budget remains

consistent regardless of ebbs and flows of economic growth. Hence, defence and self-reliance is our best insurance. It is interesting to note that the ideas of the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew and the late Dr Goh Keng Swee predated our Total Defence concept, which was adapted in 1984 from the Swiss experience. In the context of the Cold War, Dr Goh analysed that “the first line of defence is economic—economic development is the most effective inoculation against subversion and revolution. The second line is police intelligence and, the third and last line is the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF).”⁴ As our founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew surmised later in 2011, “you cannot have a strong defence, unless you have a strong finance. And you cannot have a strong defence and strong finance unless you have a strong, unified, well-educated and increasingly cohesive society. They are all part of one whole.”⁵ Hence, we have Total Defence, a whole of nation effort to insure our peace and prosperity.

OUR SECURITY CONTEXT FOR OUR DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

Ang Cheng Guan next gave a broad overview of our security context which is further elaborated in three ensuing chapters, by Joey Long, Bilveer Singh,

Theophilus Kwek and Joseph Liow. As the realist, Mr Lee Kuan Yew emphasised on many occasions, “your best friends are never your immediate neighbours.”⁶ This axiom rings true in international relations; international tensions tend to revolve around border disputes, security spillovers amongst others. But yet, Mr Lee also noted that “defence and security is closely interwoven between Singapore and Malaysia.”⁷ The historical experience of Malaysia and Singapore and our geographical proximity has intertwined both states together and the still ongoing Five Power Defence Arrangements between Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom is a case in point.⁸

Every day that Singapore survives is a miracle. From examples in history, small states tend not to survive for long. Hence, how small states can survive in international politics became Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s lifelong preoccupation. As Mr Lee expounded, “a small country must seek maximum number of friends, while maintaining the freedom to be itself as a sovereign and independent nation; we are price-takers.”⁹ According to Ang, our strategy simply is to make ourselves relevant to all the countries that matter to us.

Khong Yuen Foong’s chapter on ‘Singapore and the Great Powers’ discussed this further through an analysis of the political, economic and military dynamics of the relations. As Khong noted, “Singapore, like many of its ASEAN and Asian-Pacific neighbours, has voiced similar inclinations: it does not want to choose between the United States (US) and China.”¹¹

That is why the Ministry of Defence has twin pillars of diplomacy and deterrence to safeguard our survival, as “diplomacy is not a substitute for (defence) strength... credible deterrence must be based on a viable defence and these strategies are not mutually exclusive and the way to survive is to apply as many of them as possible.”¹² Following on, one should read former President S. R. Nathan’s reflections on defence and diplomacy where the three principles of security still rings true today:

- 1) we sought to make friends with all who would be friends with us;
- 2) we work for a multilateral system that is fair and equitable to countries big and small;
- 3) we must always maintain the ability to protect our sovereignty and defend what is critical for our survival.¹³

The last point succinctly justifies the existence of our SAF.

On the dynamics of diplomacy, one will gain wise insights from Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan's chapter on 'Pragmatic Adaptation'. At least, nine quotes deserve to be in every diplomat's notebook—note the profundity of thought and elegance of language:

1) if one does not know what one fears then everything may seem fearful;

2) assessments and interests change over time as circumstances change or sometimes even when they do not;

3) although we may fondly believe otherwise, every country's policy in every domain is always a series of messy improvisations in response to unpredictable events;

4) diplomacy is not just about making oneself agreeable; one does what one must, someone else will, if necessary clean up the damage;

5) it is all very well to talk abstractly about the long term, but one has to survive the short term in order to get to the long term;

6) it is not always obvious who your friends are or even what is in your own interests;

7) ASEAN is 'central' (to Great Powers dealing with Southeast Asia) because it is occasionally useful without ever becoming harmful;

8) the US, China and Japan are profoundly interdependent in a way that the US and the Soviet Union never were, but simultaneously profoundly mistrustful of each other;

9) the entire purpose of diplomacy is avoiding choices (between US and China). If we place ourselves in a position where we have to choose, we would have failed.¹⁴

OUR CHANGING AND INCREASINGLY COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Beyond vagaries of international relations, Ang wrote about the new security threats in the new millennium such as the transnational terrorism and humanitarian disasters, and the importance of technology, national security and community resilience, amongst others which sets the background for our transformation towards a 3rd Generation SAF. Rohan Gunaratna elaborates on the 'Changing Terrorist Landscape' further. Norman Vasu and Bernard Loo expounds our 'National Security' strategy, Peter Ho expatiates

this Singapore experience in National Security from an insider perspective and Mohd Alami Musa and Mohd Imran Mohd Taib explicates the management of 'Religious Diversity' as a counter-terrorism strategy through building community resilience across time. Alan Chong explains the chapter on Deliquescent Security Threats in the era of Hyper-Globalisation in depth. Kwa Chong Guan elucidates the impact of these threats in terms of Challenges to Strategic Intelligence.

SECURITY COOPERATION FOR THE FUTURE

Given the extensive context painted by Ang and ensuing chapters by various authors, the future of diplomacy lies in multilateral security cooperation to safeguard our collective peace and enhance our collective prosperity. Tan See Seng sets the framework on Singapore participation in 'Global Governance' noting our leadership in the Global Governance Group (3G), involvement in Small Five (S5) and the influence of Professor Tommy Koh and Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the international stage.¹⁶ In the 'International Missions of the SAF', Katie Tan and Ong Weichong articulate how we "deploy around the world as a responsible member

of the international community to protect our home.”¹⁷

Mely Caballero-Anthony brings the discussion closer to home in the chapter on ‘ASEAN Security Community’. On ASEAN, it is important to note Singapore’s heavy involvement in the Cambodian conflict. As the Dr Goh Keng Swee argued, “Cambodian issue is a life-and-death struggle, the outcome will have a profound impact on Singapore”, and then former President S. R. Nathan added, the conflict was “central to Singapore’s policy.”¹⁸ The principle involved was that no foreign military intervention should be allowed to overthrow a legally constituted regime.¹⁹ Simply put, “the invasion of a smaller country by a larger neighbor, the deposition of a legitimate government by external force and the imposition of a proxy by a foreign power,” was a “direct challenge to the fundamentals” of Singapore’s foreign policy.²⁰ Not many will know Singapore’s pivotal role in establishing the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), that the ASEAN Charter was signed during Singapore’s Chairmanship of ASEAN in 2007 and that Singapore greatly contributed to the

strengthening of ASEAN Defence Minister’s Meeting (ADMM) and later ADMM-Plus.²¹

Ralf Emmers brings it even closer in the chapter on the Five Power Defence Arrangements between Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom. He argues the “oldest institutional expression of defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia” still matters to Singapore primarily because it provides the tangible military cooperation and conventional defence component, with its new focus on non-traditional security issues such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).²²

CONCLUSION

In 2015, Singapore celebrated SG50. As we forge ahead towards a collective future of SG100, it is pertinent that we understand our past, and work our present in order to own our future. Having copies of this book and encouraging all personnel in our line units and staff departments to read them during their rest time will certainly enhance the intellectual foundation towards their affective commitment to defence (C2D). 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Ang Cheng Guan, Lee Kuan Yew’s Strategic Thought, (London: Routledge, 2012).
2. Ibid., 4.
3. Ibid., 8.
4. Ibid., 9.
5. Ibid., 8.
6. Ibid., 9.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 10.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 207.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. Ibid., 283.
14. Ibid., 295-308.
15. Ibid., 13.
16. Ibid., 73-78.
17. Ibid., 154.
18. Ibid., 191.
19. Ibid., 192.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 195-200.
22. Ibid., 173, 183-184.