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Lee Kuan Yew's Legacy: His Impact on Singapore–Malaysia Relations

By David Han Guo Xiong

Synopsis

The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew's legacy on Singapore –Malaysia relations will continue to have an impact on the diplomatic ties of these two countries. In particular his insights on the shared geography, history, culture, and the regional and geopolitical contexts for both Singapore and Malaysia will endure for many years to come.

Commentary

THE PASSING of Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew marks the end of an era in the relations between Singapore and Malaysia. But his legacy will continue to shape the republic's foreign policy towards its immediate neighbour, and his views will still be an important lens through which to understand their bilateral ties.

For Mr Lee, the shared realities of geography, history, culture, and the wider regional and geopolitical contexts would continue to underpin Singapore's relations with Malaysia. Indeed, at the core of his view on Singapore's policy towards Malaysia is the over-riding concern of the republic's continued survival as a nation; the preservation of its territorial integrity; and economic prosperity, vis-à-vis its larger northern neighbour.

Fundamentals of Singapore–Malaysia relations

The story of Lee Kuan Yew's political career is almost synonymous and inextricably tied with the history of Singapore–Malaysia relations. Right from the start, when he became the first prime minister of Singapore in 1959, he was already aware that Malaya – as Malaysia was then known – was a crucial hinterland for the economic survival of Singapore. By virtue of geographical proximity and shared colonial history, the economic, social and cultural dynamics of both countries were deeply intertwined. Mr Lee understood that for Singapore to survive economically, Singapore must merge with Malaya, which it did when Malaysia was formed in 1963.

However, the merger was short-lived and ended when Singapore separated from Malaysia on 9 August 1965. The key reason for the split was that Mr Lee's vision for a "Malaysian Malaysia" which

championed multiracialism was incompatible with the race-based policies and communal politics in Malaysia which favoured the bumiputras.

For the past 50 years, though the issue of race and ethnicity has surfaced on a few occasions, it has not severely damaged Singapore–Malaysia ties. Overall, both Singapore and Malaysia have exercised much restraint and sensitivity towards one another on the subject of race and ethnicity.

After separation, Singapore successfully overcame its economic woes and transformed itself into the prosperous city state it is today. Although Malaysia did not remain the hinterland for Singapore due to the separation, Mr Lee's insight on the close economic interdependence of the two immediate neighbours is still valid. Singapore's largest trading partner is Malaysia and good economic cooperation is vital to both countries. The ongoing Iskandar development project is a testament to the strong economic links of both countries. Singapore and Malaysia also cooperate widely in other areas such as tourism, education, environmental issues, culture, and so on.

Managing bilateral issues

To be sure there have been contentious disputes over the past five decades. These include the problem of water supply; the withdrawal of contributions of Malaysian workers from the Central Provident Fund (CPF); ownership of Malayan Railway (KTM) land and Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) issues; bridge replacement for the Causeway; and the question of sovereignty over Pedra Branca. Nevertheless, Mr Lee's pragmatism, which is also shared by Malaysia, has been the key to overcoming the periodic tensions which arose in the past and may likely continue in the future.

The current excellent relations between Singapore and Malaysia under the leadership of Prime Ministers Lee Hsien Loong and Najib Razak is a clear indicator that cordial relations based on rationality and pragmatic interest will prevail over emotional and irrational attachment to narrow ethnic or communal agendas in the future.

As both Singapore and Malaysia are close neighbours, regional dynamics have been crucial factors for the foreign policies of both nations. For Mr Lee, a peaceful and stable Southeast Asia, characterised by cordial economic and diplomatic cooperation amongst Southeast Asian states without interfering in each other's internal affairs, was vital for Singapore's sovereignty and survival. Accordingly Mr Lee contributed significantly to the development of ASEAN so that ASEAN countries can work together towards regional goals in the ASEAN Way.

Singapore, Malaysia in the ASEAN context

Similarly, Malaysia has always recognised the importance of ASEAN for regional stability which would be conducive for advancing the national interests of Malaysia. It is also in the context of ASEAN that both Malaysia and Singapore can seek to improve their bilateral ties. Such similarities in viewpoint should continue to form a common ground for cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia, and for furthering the interests of ASEAN as a whole.

On broader geopolitical issues, Mr Lee saw that while competition between the United States and China is inevitable, conflict is not. He held the view that the US should help China to transit into the international community in the spirit of cooperation.

Indeed, peaceful and good ties between China and the US without major conflicts would benefit Singapore's economic development and survival. Singapore has strong economic ties with China, while it also maintains close military and economic relations with the US. Singapore's cooperative and hedging behaviour is motivated by its desire for both China and the US to maintain peaceful ties, and not for Singapore to be forced to choose sides.

Likewise, Malaysia also shares broadly similar strategic concerns with Singapore. Malaysia too has strong economic relations with China, and close military ties with the US. Good China-US ties would serve the interests of Malaysia as well. Given these overlaps, Singapore and Malaysia can work together, within the context of ASEAN, to engage both Beijing and Washington to enhance mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation in the Southeast Asian region.

Continued relevance of Lee's views on bilateral ties

Lee Kuan Yew's views of relations between Singapore and Malaysia would continue to be relevant though not the key factor that shapes relations between Singapore and Malaysia.

The leadership of both countries should be mindful that the shared geography, history, culture, and regional and geopolitical contexts would always be crucial components that shape Singapore–Malaysian relations. A pragmatic and realistic outlook should consistently undergird and drive peaceful and constructive relations of the two countries, and not allow issues coloured by historical baggage or narrow domestic interests to hinder the relations of the two close neighbours.

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