

ASIAN VIEWPOINT

Singapore at 60: Will the miracle continue?

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



In a world where small nations get devoured by bigger ones, Singapore did not disappear. That — and its astounding economic growth — is Singapore's main achievement during the 60 years of its independence, which it will celebrate on Aug 9.

The foundations and solid institutions are in place, but will they hold up in the face of the future? There are reasons to believe so.

Although Singapore is a small state, its sovereignty and territorial integrity — the two primary markers of independence — are secure. It has struck up expansive and intensive relations with the great powers of the US, China, Russia and (incipiently) India while deepening its ties with its South-east Asian neighbours both bilaterally and through Asean.

Those global and regional relations encompass the broad areas of the economy, politics and security. All this would have been incomprehensible in 1965 when Singapore came into being as more or less an orphaned state.

Why has Singapore not been taken over? It is because Singapore has never its place in the world for granted. It paid little heed to the ideological divide between communism and capitalism during the Cold War, preferring instead to invest its national energies in development. The world learned to care. Singapore moved up rapidly from its colonial provenance as an entrepot to an intrinsic production hub in Southeast Asia. Producing for the world, Singapore became a Global City.

A city that means business

Singapore's business is "business". That is literally true. Even pre-colonial Singapore had been a transit point for the business of its times, carried by the vessels that plied the waters connecting Pacific Asia with West Asia and Europe. When Sir Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a British entrepot in 1819, it advanced so rapidly that it became the second economic capital of the British Indian Empire after Calcutta (now Kolkata).

But that imperial system came to an end with the onset of decolonisation after World War II and Singapore's departure from Malaysia in 1965 deprived it of its essential economic hinterland. There was no option in the circumstances but to re-imagine and re-engineer Singapore as a Global City — a city that belonged no longer to colonial time nor to geographical space in South-east Asia. Singapore placed its bets on the world at large and that worked. The Global City gained a new lease of life in the world of change.

On the domestic front, the transformation of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) into a credible defence force, based on the twin pillars of deterrence and diplomacy, secured the nation's physical frontiers. Within those borders, strict laws kept the peace in a



Singapore has established itself as an instantly recognisable brand in global affairs. That is quite an

multiracial and multireligious country. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) justified its authoritarianism by its ability to ensure an atmosphere of political peace that made economic development possible and raised living standards rapidly and dramatically.

Yes, the growth of civil society was thwarted, but civic society — the network of face-to-face relationships that sustain day-to-day living — flourished in the sparkling new public housing estates that had sprung up in defiance of the ethnic tribalism of an erstwhile village-dotted economic geography. Lush orchards and their seasonal fruits disappeared; sadly, so did the horizontal solidarities of culture among villagers that had once made Singapore tactile, recognisable, very much itself.

High-rise public housing removed the elective affinities of custom — among Chinese, Malays, Indians and others — and replaced them with the relative blandness of high-rise living where neighbours could be from any race or religion, but shared the anonymity of seclusion. The only neighbourhood that mattered in the new city was Singapore at large. A city started, slowly, to become a nation.

The process has been so successful that many young Singaporeans have given up the fine art of worrying, an art that their mostly immigrant ancestors honed to existential perfection. Singaporeans honestly believe that their nation is here to stay. Yes, some worry about their economic prospects in an uncertain world but few worry about the idea of a viable and sustainable Singapore.

By contrast, foreigners, including professionals, flock to these shores, first to work, then to seek permanent residence and finally to apply for citizenship — the gaining of which entails giving up their previous citizenship.

Foreigners possess choice: Talented Asian professionals have places to go to. They choose Singapore for its economic advantages over other cities and countries, its strong law and order environment, and an educational system that prepares their children for the future. They are drawn to its Asian ambience, which does not force immigrants to become part of some Western mosaic or melting pot but allows them to retain their cultures in a multiracial and multi-religious country.

Philosopher-king

All this happened because of the triumph of mind over matter, of planning over chance, of will over fate. Obsessive governance achieved — through bold strategy, meticulous planning and execution — a Singapore that its founding leaders had conceived of in advance. In that sense, Singapore is a Platonic state, one envisaged by philosophers in the realm of ideas before politicians and administrators turn vision into reality.

Lee Kuan Yew was the original Platonic philosopher-king. He was not the only one. Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's economic architect, was another; S Rajaratnam, the cultural architect, was yet another; and labour leader CV Devan Nair, who rose to the presidency, was another. Also in the group were Toh Chin Chye and lawyer EW Barker. Singapore's founding fathers were deep thinkers and also reflexive men of action. They understood that power is fungible.

Thought and action came together in institutions. Lee nurtured a team of political and technocratic leaders to create an institutional structure for a Singapore that would survive him. He institutionalised a working culture that disdained corruption and based career advancement on meritocracy.

Singapore is now a First World country. In the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2025, Singapore ranks 21st globally and is the most influential Asean nation, excelling in governance, business, trade, education and science. That is quite an achievement. So is the fact that Singapore has established itself as an instantly recognisable brand in global affairs. Its foreign economic and political policies are predictable, reliable and trustworthy. It does not change its economic or political positions because of sudden shifts in public opinion. Vested racial and religious interests and time-serving politicians who exist to fan public sentiments do not succeed in holding the government hostage. Brand Singapore, which stands for stability and excellence, arrived after Independence and has survived for 60 years.

But will it last in the decades to come?

Challenges ahead

The chief challenge for Singapore is twofold. Domestically, low birth rates threaten de-

mographic decline unless the population is topped up through pro-natalist programmes and carefully calibrated immigration policies. These are being done, although the price to be paid is a degree of public disquiet over the presence of foreigners in the local population. Singapore society has changed markedly. The new generation holds perceptions and points of view different from their forefathers. They did not experience the benefits of migration and under-value their current contributions.

Externally, an existential challenge is that the world could be on the brink of an era of great discord. Globalisation is losing momentum, not least because of the economic policies of the current US administration. Also, the US appears to be willing to walk away from its military alliances and political commitments around the world, making Asia and the rest of the world far less secure. Globalisation and the US's presence as Asia's offshore power balancer helped ensure Singapore's economic success and Asia's overall strategic stability. Those benign forces are in retreat.

On that foreign front, Singapore has at least two tested weapons in its national armoury. First, decades of budgetary surplus have given it a nest egg estimated at close to two trillion dollars, several times the size of its annual economic output. That buffer is a source of resilience. Singapore's fiscal prudence, exercised during even long years of healthy growth, has created national reserves that will stand it in good stead in difficult times. Second, despite the protective American nuclear umbrella over Asia, Singapore never outsourced its security to even the US. The SAF is a credible deterrent force because Singapore does not believe that a foreign power, no matter how friendly, will come to its aid automatically in the event of war.

But war is not at the forefront of Singapore's minds. Economics, and more recently, geopolitics are. Singapore can cut deals with its immediate hinterland to offset some of the setbacks of de-globalisation. A start has been made with the idea of developing a special economic zone with Malaysia. Singapore is also strengthening its ties with like-minded nations in Asia and elsewhere and gaining access to technology and economies of scale in that way.

In a world marked by shifting powers and looming uncertainty, Singapore's survival remains neither an accident nor inevitable — it is, and will always be, a deliberate act of statecraft.

There is a Latin phrase, *alea iacta est*, which means the "die is cast". It is famously attributed to Julius Caesar when he and his army crossed the Rubicon River in 49 BC, marking the point of no return on their march to Rome. Singapore has already crossed the Rubicon by surviving as an independent state against all odds.

But the march continues for this island nation — this city-state born into a feral world and forged to survive. ■

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