

Review – Singapore Is Not An Island

Written by Benjamin Tze Ern Ho

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BENJAMIN TZE ERN HO, JUN 17 2021

Singapore Is Not An Island: Views on Singapore Foreign Policy
By Bilahari Kausikan
Straits Times Press, 2017

The study of Singapore's foreign policy has been one that has been conspicuously limited, in spite of the city-state's much studied policies in other areas. Apart from Michael Leifer's *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* and Narayanan Ganesan's *Realism and Interdependence in Singapore's Foreign Policy*, published in 2000 and 2005, the study of how this small state navigates the vagaries and vicissitudes of international politics remains understudied. This is changing.

A number of retired Singaporean career diplomats have now contributed their views on Singapore's foreign policy over the years, and among them, is Bilahari Kausikan. Kausikan is a veteran Singaporean diplomat who retired in 2013, after serving in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) for 32 years, including fulfilling the role of Second Permanent Secretary and Permanent Secretary between 2001 and 2013. As a well-known public intellectual, Kausikan frequently provides commentary on both domestic and foreign political issues on his Facebook page and is also known to be a prolific writer post retirement, his op-eds frequently appearing in both mainstream and social media.

In *Singapore Is Not An Island*, Kausikan provides an unvarnished assessment and discussion of Singapore's foreign policy and how the city-state continues to maintain its relevance in a world which, in his words, "will probably get along fine without a fully sovereign and independent Singapore." To those who have made the study of Singapore's foreign policy both a matter of professional and personal interest, much of what is written in the book would not be unfamiliar. Indeed, much of Kausikan's worldview imbibes the thinking of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, who was under no illusions about the magnitude of the city-state's political challenges and the extent of its vulnerability both in the early years of its independence up till today. Given the style and accessibility of Kausikan's writing this book is likely to be a main staple for students and scholars of Singapore's foreign policy who are interested in understanding how the island-state seeks to engage the wider world in international affairs.

In the book Kausikan provides us with a broad excursion of the major themes and issues pertaining to Singapore's foreign policy. Kausikan sets the stage by reminding readers – and one would suspect this is written primarily for a younger Singaporean audience – that Singapore's national interests (e.g. economic development, a stable international environment, and preserving the Singaporean way of life) should not be taken for granted and that the fundamentals of its foreign policy (such as its innate vulnerability, the need to view the wider world as its hinterland, and wanting to be friends with everyone) put in place in the early years of Singapore's independence should not be easily forgotten.

Following that, Kausikan touches on the topic of 'The Sovereignty of Small States', a theme which generations of foreign service officers in the MFA are deeply acquainted with in the course of their work. As Kausikan loves to remind us, "for small states, relevance is not something to be taken for granted. The creation and maintenance of relevance must be the overarching strategic objective of small states" (pp.40-41). Such thinking is highly pervasive in the minds of Singapore's diplomats, and can be evidenced in the country's highly open and pro-business economic

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policies. The idea that Singapore needs to constantly reinvent itself to ensure its relevance to the outside world is a fundamental challenge that generations of leaders and policy makers have to undertake.

Kausikan goes on to discuss Singapore's value and position vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, a major theme that takes up almost a third of the book, and one which is evidently close to Kausikan's heart. Some of the major topics of Singapore's foreign policy are being expounded upon here, including Singapore-Malaysia relations, Singapore's thinking on ASEAN (and more broadly, Asia) as well as the future of the region's security architecture. All these are big and heavy topics and are deserving of scholarly theses. Credit has to go to Kausikan for dissecting these issues in a manner that both scholars and the average reader are able to benefit from. By providing examples and real-life illustrations, Kausikan proffers us a reminder that what diplomats deal with in their jobs has tangible consequences and that we ought to care about foreign policy – even if the everyday workings of it take place out of the public gaze.

The book then takes us into more challenging terrain, that of major power competition. Given that this book was published in 2017, much of the existing tensions in the U.S.-China rivalry were not as pronounced then as they are today. Yet as Kausikan forewarns, “the US-China relationship is complex, difficult to encapsulate in a phrase or sentence [and] is characterized by both profound interdependence and deep strategic mistrust” (pp.195-196). At the same time, countries continue to possess agency (however limited that might be), and any predetermined future of the region should not be naively accepted. As Kausikan suggests, it is “precisely the existence of competition that holds out the possibility of manoeuvre to preserve autonomy” (p.197). As a bonus, Kausikan also provides some broad insights into other major global topics such as nuclear weapons issues, the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, as well as the relevance of Middle East developments and Brexit to Southeast Asia.

The final two sections of the book cover more limited, but no less important themes. First the issue of human rights, which Singapore – over the years – has been subjected to Western criticisms over, and two, the worldview of Lee Kuan Yew, which continues to play a major role in the way in which Singaporean diplomats see the world and Singapore's place in it. In a way, both themes are intertwined insofar as they reflect Lee's understanding of Singapore's place in the world. Despite much of Singapore's learning – especially in domestic institutional building – from the West, the city-state remains geographically and culturally distinct from the West, its own unique characteristics which are reflected in its practice and approach to foreign policy. To that end, Mr. Lee once quipped that “reasonable men adapt, unreasonable men change the world” (p.273).

It is this adaptive ability of Singapore which has allowed the island-state, as some say, to punch above its weight in international affairs. The frequently cited adage that one has to take the world as it is, not as how it wants it to be, continues to inform the mainstream exposition of Singapore's foreign policy and which Kausikan's views evidently explicate. That said, Singapore's foreign policy is by no means a static one and given the changing international situation, its leaders and policy makers are also aware of the need to adapt to a new international reality. Kausikan's views seem to emphasize the need for greater continuity with the past – which has served Singapore well no doubt – but he is less clear on the future challenges that Singapore faces and what the changes are, if any, that may be required to safeguard Singapore's interest in a rapidly changing world. No doubt the nature of Sino-American competition will be a challenge that Singapore will have to contend with. Unlike his well-known colleague Kishore Mahbubani (who was the Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy), whose writings are much more sympathetic to China, Kausikan's position remains one that takes its reference from an old blueprint – one that has surely been effective, but which may be less relevant moving forward. Given Kausikan's formidable intellect and diplomatic nous, it is a topic that he is well-placed to address, and which his book could be clearer on. That said, by providing a first edition (and the author suspects a future update of Kausikan's thoughts will be available) of a much needed exposition of Singapore's diplomatic worldview, this book will become a frequently referenced edition if one is interested in the signposts and contours of Singapore's foreign policy.

About the author:

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Benjamin Tze Ern Ho is an Assistant Professor in the China Programme, Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. He teaches masters courses on Singapore's Foreign Policy and the International Relations of Northeast Asia.