

By Invitation

Can Singaporeans read?



Forget self-help books. Read more about the real state of the world.



Kishore Mahbubani

For The Straits Times

A new year has begun. It often begins with new hope. This year, it would be fair to say that for many Singaporeans, it is beginning with more angst than hope.

The world seems to be in a troubled place. Global economic growth is slowing down. In October 2016, International Monetary Fund chief economist and economic counsellor Maurice Obstfeld said: "Taken as a whole, the world economy has moved sideways."

Global trade is not picking up. The developed world is mired in problems. Brexit and the election of Mr Donald Trump to the United States presidency were two big shocks we experienced last year. This year promises to be a rough year for global geopolitics, with Mr Trump having already provoked China even before his inauguration on Jan 20.

Singapore has already felt some effects of this rough patch in US-China relations.

The Global Times of Beijing on

Sept 21, 2016, accused Singapore of having "insisted on adding contents which endorsed Philippines' South China Sea arbitration case and attempted to strengthen the contents on the South China Sea in the document" despite "unequivocal opposition from many countries".

Somewhat unusually, a retired Chinese general, Jin Yinan, now a director at the People's Liberation Army's National Defence University, strongly criticised Singapore.

He said that China should make Singapore "pay the price for seriously damaging China's interests", adding: "We understand it has to survive among big countries, but now Singapore is not seeking balance among big countries - it is playing big countries off against each other... this is playing with fire."

READING THE RIGHT STUFF

Many Singaporeans, especially some of our businessmen, were surprised and troubled by this obvious downturn in China-Singapore relations. Some were completely surprised by these events. They did not see them coming. Yet, some of these challenges in China-Singapore relations could have been predicted.

Indeed, they were predicted. I, too, have made such predictions.

On the occasion of Singapore's

50th anniversary in August 2015, I published a book titled *Can Singapore Survive?*

This is what I wrote then: "In due course, probably sooner than expected, US-China relations will return to the historical norm. There may not be a direct outright conflict, but there could be rising competition and rivalry. And when this happens, few other nations will be put in as difficult a spot as Singapore will be. Our society could be rent apart by any such rising tension."

I then added: "Singaporeans should therefore start preparing psychologically for a downturn in US-China relations because it is a political inevitability. And even before this downturn has happened, Singapore has already been subject to pressures from both sides."

In short, the warning to prepare psychologically for a rough road in US-China relations was given almost two years ago.

Why was it not heeded? Perhaps not enough people knew or read about that prediction of mine. Another simple answer is that Singaporeans don't read enough. And when they do read, their reading is narrowly focused.

One clue to what Singaporeans read is provided by The Sunday Times' bestseller list. The list of non-fiction books should be seen as a national wall of shame. Instead of looking at the world and trying to

understand how it is changing, Singaporeans indulge in self-help books.

(As an aside, I'd like to point out that the New York Times has created a sensible precedent of separating self-help books from the serious books, and I think other papers, including The Sunday Times, should emulate this practice.)

Even the titles are embarrassing. They include *Money: Master The Game* and *Jumpstart Your Priorities*. Week after week, Singaporeans drown themselves in self-help books. The underlying assumption of many Singaporeans seems to be that if I take care of my individual self, I will be fine.

This assumption is a massive act of folly. We don't live in a large, secure country. We live in a small, highly exposed, indeed, the most

globalised country in the world.

Our destiny is more likely to be rocked by events happening outside of Singapore. Hence, if we don't read books written about our external environment, we are committing national suicide.

To survive in the long run, we must develop a population that is finely attuned to external developments. Indeed, this was the key reason why I published *Can Singapore Survive?* I wanted to spell out some of the obvious threats coming our way.

REPLACE ANGST WITH ANALYSIS

Many more obvious threats are coming our way. Let me suggest one more. In the coming downturn in US-China relations, another organisation is very vulnerable and, indeed, could be broken up. What is the name of this organisation? It is Asean.

Why does it matter to Singapore? It matters because Singapore has been the single largest beneficiary of the geopolitical umbrella that Asean has created over South-east Asia. Hence, if this umbrella is damaged, the 3.41 million Singapore citizens will suffer more than other South-east Asians, in relative terms. No number of self-help books will get us out of this geopolitical quandary.

So is there a solution for my fellow Singaporeans? Yes, there is. It is psychologically healthier to replace angst with analysis. Quite often, it doesn't take a geopolitical genius to predict some obvious challenges coming Singapore's way.

We should therefore take a pause from reading individual self-help books and start focusing on larger national and regional challenges.

One good way of jump-starting this process is to go back and read some of the speeches by three of our key founding fathers, Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam.

There was one common theme in all their speeches: Look carefully at the outside world, understand what is coming our way, and prepare for it. Fortunately, their speeches can be read on the National Archives of Singapore website at

www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/ This database is searchable and speeches are also listed by author.

Mr Rajaratnam gave a legendary speech at the United Nations General Assembly on Sept 21, 1965, spelling out the principles of Singapore's foreign policy. These principles are still valid.

Personally, as a young man, I truly enjoyed the speeches of Dr Goh, which were compiled into two books. They were: *The Economics Of Modernisation And Other Essays* (Asia Pacific Press, 1972) and *Wealth Of East Asian Nations: Speeches And Writings* (Federal Publications, 1995).

When I got older, I was shocked to learn that these two volumes were out of print. Fortunately, you can find them in the library. Mr Lee's speeches are also easily available.

Of course, it was a huge but fortuitous freak of history that all three of them were geopolitical geniuses. They were also avid readers. They read books consistently and shared their wisdom through their speeches. As a result, my generation of baby boomers was lucky as we received constant guidance on how the world was changing.

We should now use our founding fathers' methods of analysis and apply them to today's world. During the Cold War, Singapore was clearly more pro-American than pro-Soviet. Yet, we were able to maintain reasonably good relations with both the US and the former Soviet Union, even though both countries were highly antagonistic towards each other.

In 1976, at a high point in the Cold War, I accompanied Mr Rajaratnam when he visited Moscow to meet Mr Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister. Our relations with the Soviet Union were frigid. Yet, Mr Rajaratnam received a warm reception in cold Moscow. That is what good diplomacy is all about.

The US and China, relatively speaking, are far less antagonistic towards each other. They cooperate as much as they compete.

So, if Mr Lee, Dr Goh and Mr Rajaratnam were alive today, what would they do to maintain good relations with both the US and China?

A little less reading of self-help books and a little more reading of books on Singapore and the region may help Singaporeans find the answer to this question.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. His book *The Asean Miracle: A Catalyst For Peace* is forthcoming from NUS Press.