

Openness to geopolitical flux is part of Singapore's DNA

From being part of the British Empire, to exiting it, to forming closer ties with the US, Singapore has always had to stay attuned to geopolitical shifts. Today is no different.



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Marking the 200th anniversary of Stamford Raffles' landing in Singapore is not only about commemorating long-ago colonial history. The occasion is also opportune to reflect on Singapore's shifting geopolitical realities: How it entered and then exited the British Empire into the turbulence of the 20th century, and Singapore's move to engage more deeply with the United States during the Cold War. Questions of geopolitics, alliances, rivalry and loyalty are alive again amid current Sino-American tensions. Great Power play is back with a vengeance and like it or not, Singapore has to play this new Great Game.

BRITISH EMPIRE

The broadest ambitions of empire led to the "founding" of modern Singapore by British East India Company officials in 1819. With the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, Britain could look beyond Europe and bring new focus to ventures in Asia and the Americas. When Raffles landed, the British were yet to consolidate their empire in India and wage the Opium War against China for full trade access. They did not dominate the region.

The Dutch had come earlier and built rich trade networks. Although in decline, they had a strong base in the East Indies – present-day Indonesia – and when the Dutch objected to the British factory established in Singapore, it was not clear that the initiative by Raffles and other officials in Asia would be retained.

The early and strong growth of Singapore turned opinion in London. Colonial powers sitting in Europe agreed in the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824 to carve out lines of trade and spheres of influence in Asia. Geopolitics was part of the Singapore's founding DNA.

EXITING EMPIRE

By the 1960s, Singapore was no longer a colony as it had attained a rudiment of self-governance after World War II, but Britain's

fingerprint was still evident.

Growing up in this era, you could feel the British presence continue, and not only with their companies and goods. In the use of English, with the norm of "received pronunciation" and an ideal of a plummy BBC accent on television and radio. Scholars and those with means strived to get into United Kingdom universities, especially Oxford and Cambridge.

After Singapore's Independence in 1965, Britain announced plans in mid-1967 to close its military bases, to consternation in the young Republic. The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) was in its infancy, and relations with neighbours remained tense, following Konfrontasi and separation, while the Vietnam War was also escalating.

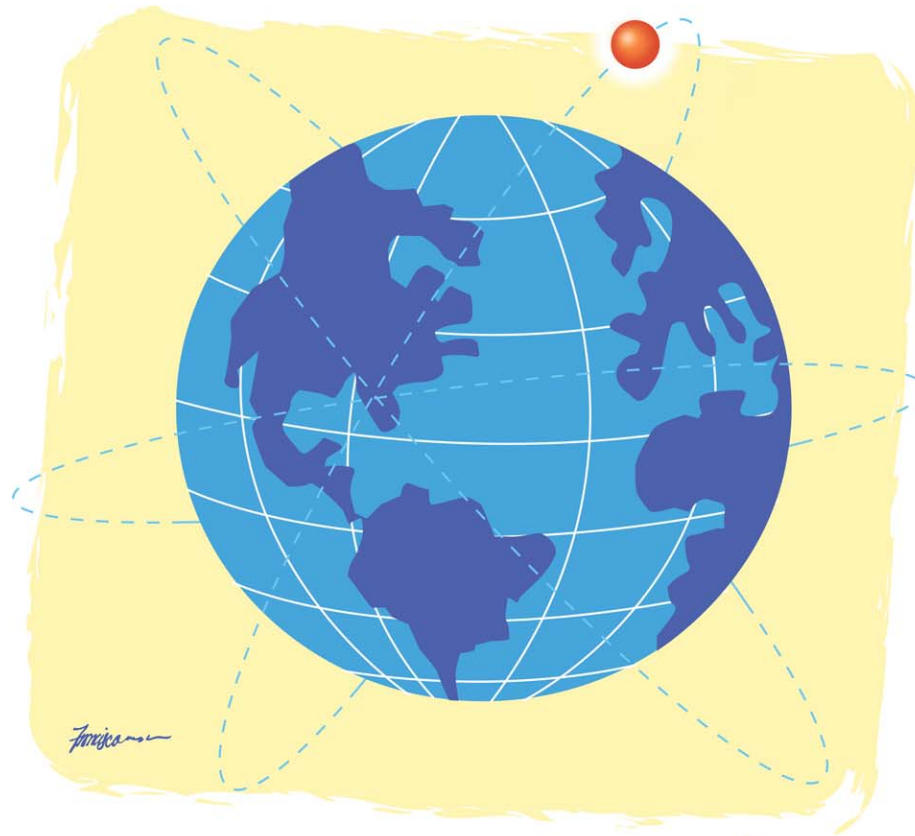
The bases contributed over 20 per cent to Singapore's gross national product and employed 25,000 workers. At that juncture, the island had little industry and depended mainly on the bases and the port. The pullout, finally set for 1971, would cause serious economic impact.

Singapore's then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew pushed back – threatening to give a dockyard to the Japanese and disrupt British shipping. Mr Lee and then Minister for Finance Goh Keng Swee even went to London to take the issue to British political leaders, face to face, and rally broader support through television appearances. Their efforts were to little avail.

The Empire was exhausted from the war. London caught world attention in the "Swinging 60s" with its fashion and music, but its economy struggled even after the sterling was devalued, and deep cuts in spending were needed, especially to military costs.

Yet steps to smooth the transition were offered. A soft loan of the then considerable sum of £50 million was coughed up. Key British assets were transferred to Singapore without charge. That included naval bases that, when converted and commercialised, would lay the foundation for Singapore's shipbuilding industry, from which today's offshore and marine sector has evolved.

To ease security concerns, the United Kingdom brought into place the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), with Australia and New Zealand together with Malaysia and Singapore. As the SAF geared up, a token contingent from these FPDA country forces remained after the 1971 deadline. The last British



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soldier left Singapore in March 1976 and New Zealanders continued right up to 1989. The FPDA, although it does not attract much attention, remains in place and UK-Singapore relations today remain deep and strong. This is not only in economic ties. There is speculation that the UK might be seeking a new military base in Asia, with Singapore cited as a possible location.

GLOBAL ASSOCIATIONS

Through the Empire, Singapore also inherited relationships with the far-flung and polyglot Commonwealth of former colonies. In 1971, the same year as the British withdrawal, Singapore proudly hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Chogm), the first such meeting to be held outside London. This was a landmark conference at the time for Singapore under a young PM Lee Kuan Yew, who emerged as a leading figure in the newly independent states.

Jump to 2018, and PM Lee Hsien Loong commemorated the Commonwealth in recalling Singapore's exit from the Empire: "The odds were against our survival, but we pulled through. We were deeply grateful to the friends

who came to our help in times of need, many of whom were in the Commonwealth."

From the Commonwealth experience, Singapore developed the habit of being part of multilateral groups and to bridge very different perspectives and seek consensus. The most immediate and proximate grouping to which this applies is Asean, within our own region.

Singapore has also been active across distant geographies in diverse groups like the Global Governance Group (3G) of smaller countries at the United Nations, Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation and Alliance of Small Island States. Such multilateral practices run in parallel with the engagement of the Great Powers.

STEPPING UP TIES WITH AMERICA

In today's world, the UK no longer provides the dominant framework for global order; the US does. Singapore recognised this and started to step up engagements with the US decades ago.

When a young Lee Kuan Yew first visited the US as prime minister in 1967 – the same year the British announced their withdrawal – he was received by the Lyndon B. Johnson administration as the

Vietnam conflict escalated. In the 1970s, Mr Lee developed a rapport with the Nixon administration as ties opened up with China.

For decades, Mr Lee consistently maintained that the US should remain engaged in Asia. This has directed policy and ongoing efforts, even into the present decade.

Even as emphasis shifted to the US, the strategy of remaining engaged geopolitically grew from Singapore's initial experience in the British Empire: ingrained in the national psyche is a sense of our place as a small entity in a dynamic and challenging region, and awareness of the need to engage the emerging and great powers as global order shifts. That need continues today.

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Some ask what Singapore will do as Sino-American tensions rise and geopolitics are shifting.

My own take on this is that as a country, Singapore did not exit the British Empire to become subjugated to an American world or a potential future Chinese hegemony.

Singapore's interests are not to permanently ally with one major power or another. The key issue is not only whom we work with, but what we work towards.

We uphold the importance of a rules-based, international order and therefore are willing to work with like-minded countries. Today, that must include not only the US in the hope that a stable policy can be found. We should also encourage efforts to accommodate China as a rising power.

Beyond these two great powers, it is increasingly important to work with Asean, and others farther away like Japan, France and Germany and other like-minded partners in Europe, and Canada – all those who support a rules-based and inclusive order in Asia and across the world.

In this, there can be something of a return to the former colonial power, Britain. There is political disarray at present over Brexit. But post Brexit, many expect the British to bring new focus to ties with Asia and the rest of the world. Engaging the UK can, in this context, be important not as a matter of nostalgia but as a forward and outward looking relationship.

Singapore was established by the British and then exited the Empire at a time when the shifting flux of power was evident.

Today, as similar changes emerge, Singapore must be newly open not only to ties with the great powers but to broader cooperation and collective leadership with middle-sized and smaller states. Perhaps even more than the English language or other elements that the British imprinted on modern Singapore, this geopolitical sensibility is a key legacy.

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