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Trump-Kim Summit

S. Rajaratnam and Singapore's Role

By Alan Chong and Graham Ong-Webb

Synopsis

Hosting the Trump-Kim Summit is entirely consistent with the vision of Singapore's first foreign minister – S. Rajaratnam. Yet, it is not enough that Singapore is trusted and neutral. Singapore must have the capacity and capability to actually host an unprecedented summit that enjoys the confidence of the President of the United States of America and the Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, who are officially each other's worst enemies.

Commentary

THE ANNOUNCEMENT by US President Donald Trump on 10 May 2018 of the choice of Singapore as the venue for the never-before summit between himself and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) State Affairs Commission Chairman Kim Jong Un provided a clear vindication of the fundamentals of Singapore's foreign policy as articulated by its first foreign minister, the late S. Rajaratnam.

In his view, Singapore, as a small state, could demonstrate a positive presence in international relations in spite of its geographical diminutiveness. This apparent favour bestowed upon Singapore by Pyongyang and Washington beckons reflection on how Singapore has built its credentials for hosting summit diplomacy.

Rajaratnam's Three Categories of States

During his student years in London, Rajaratnam observed the deadly power-derived manoeuvres between the Fascist and Democratic powers that led to the outbreak of World War Two. At the same time, he was buffeted by the competing explanations of rival political theories that ranged from the Far Left to the Far Right.

A third problem that soon preoccupied the mind of the budding nationalist was the prospect of an independent Singapore, free from British colonial rule and its defence umbrella, and subsequently the new Republic's position in relation to the new states and great powers in its neighbourhood.

This quest for a suitable foreign policy came to a head when Rajaratnam was appointed foreign minister by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Rajaratnam decided that theories were never universally applicable. Singapore had to pioneer its own way in foreign policy.

In his own words, Rajaratnam set out to distinguish between a 'foreign policy of words, of principles' and a 'foreign policy of deeds'. The former communicate open intentions often dressed up as high morality and aspiration, but 'in the world of harsh realities [states] may be forced to do things which do not quite harmonise with its proclaimed principles'.

Therefore, in the 'jungle of international politics', discrepancies between these two versions of foreign policy must be observed closely since a policy of reassuring proclamations may lull one into a false sense of security. From these premises Rajaratnam devised three categories of foreign policies that Singapore might encounter.

Foreign Policy: Between Words and Deeds

First, the ideal foreign policy of words coinciding with deeds. Included in this category are Singapore's close friends and allies because of a coincidence of fundamental objectives and national interests, in spite of minor bilateral 'irritations' from time to time.

The second category would be those whose deeds reflect normalisation and amity towards Singapore, while their official rhetoric reflects a dogmatic ideological hostility. '[T]here is always the hope that friendly relations, however tentative and however cautious, could in the course of time and with good sense on both sides, mature into friendship of the first category'.

The third category is the negative extreme where both words and deeds are consistently hostile to Singaporean national interests and hence irreconcilable enemies. Rajaratnam observed in 1965 that no country had thus far entered this category. Five decades – and a Cold War – later, it would appear that Singapore rarely had to deal with the nightmarish third category.

From time to time, Singapore's foreign policy partners have oscillated between categories one and two. Rajaratnam had always counselled patience, and adherence to the principle of welcoming friendship from all directions. This was also rationality in action, since no state of enmity could last forever.

Fair-minded Rationality

As host on 12 June 2018, Singapore would be projecting its trademark diplomatic patience and rationality into the electrifying atmosphere of the Trump-Kim summit.

Given Singapore's long-standing ties with the United States -- since 1836 in fact -- its officials will in all likelihood offer steady, constructive praise for President Donald Trump's bold diplomatic gamble in meeting with the once reviled 'rogue state'.

Washington has also conveniently reciprocated since the Cold War by avoiding the phrase 'major non-NATO ally' in describing its warm relations with Singapore notwithstanding severe frictions with the latter over human rights issues in the 1990s.

Likewise, Singaporean diplomatic rationality manifests in a foreign policy of measuring words against deeds in maximising friends and minimising enemies. This has enabled Singapore to act as a non-judgmental trading partner with North Korea since 1975 when diplomatic recognition was accorded.

Singapore has mostly adopted an equidistant approach to Korean unification, rarely condemning Pyongyang's behaviour in jingoistic tones. Singapore also imposed UN-mandated sanctions against North Korean efforts to procure goods with military potential.

In fact, Singapore joined up -- as several other ASEAN countries have -- in the international economic sanctions effort against North Korea last year and there was no apparent dint in standing relations to be felt. Overall, at no point did Singapore sever relations with Pyongyang nor sanctioned North Korean officials. Pyongyang retains a full-fledged embassy in Singapore all these years.

Diplomatic Experience, Summit Hospitality and Good Safety

Singapore's experience in hosting key diplomatic events from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1971 to the meeting of Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou in 2015 has been well projected. In addition to its reputation for world-class hospitality, Singapore's attractiveness in hosting the Trump-Kim summit is also crucially derived from its zero tolerance towards terrorism and threats against diplomatic events.

Among other things, this is reflected in the country's hosting of the annual Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) for 17 times since 2002 without a single security mishap to dent proceedings. The SLD is a "Track One" inter-governmental Asian security forum led by the International Institute for Strategic Studies and attended by heads of state/government, defence ministers, senior officials and military chiefs of various countries from different regions of the world.

These individuals feel comfortable in Singapore as they interacted freely with each other, leaving their personal security in the hands of the law and order agencies in the city-state.

Amidst the security and dizzying publicity accompanying the 12 June Summit, Rajaratnam's wisdom remains a hallmark of Singapore's foreign policy. It is therefore one thing for observers of Singaporean diplomacy to claim that 'Singapore Inc.' is trusted and neutral, quite another to actually deliver a summit that should enjoy the best possible preconditions for some degree of success amongst the highest leaders of two nuclear-armed states who are officially each other's worst enemies.

Singapore's credentials of neutrality have been unpretentiously presented by Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan as providing tea and coffee to the Summiteers. Yet, this has amounted to nearly S$20 million in total including other logistics. But one should not begrudge the expenditure, especially since Rajaratnam's thought has actually supplied the long-term objectives for the Republic – a regional peace that will keep giving to Singapore's economy and the entire Asia-Pacific for a very long time.

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