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The Cold War and the Making of Singapore **Professor Tan Tai Yong, Yale-NUS College, NUS**

The Salon, Level 1, National Museum of Singapore

19 August 2017

Introduction

Prof Tan Tai Yong positioned his lecture, “The Cold War and the Making of Singapore”, around Singapore’s history in the context of the global landscape.

He demonstrated how Singapore’s independence in 1965 was influenced by global events taking place in the late 1950s and 1960s, starting with the post-World War Two (WWII) world that led to the Cold War, along with decolonisation by the British and the looming Communist threat. This is unlike the usual approach of looking only at the internal narrative that led to Singapore’s independence.

Post-War Southeast Asia

In World War Two, colonial forces were defeated by the Japanese. By the end of the war, the colonial powers were severely weakened. In a sense, the European Allied Forces may have won the war, but they had also “surrendered” their right and their moral legitimacy to rule over anyone.

Most parts of Asia experienced rising nationalist and anti-colonial revolutionary movements after World War Two. Some of these movements were violent, some more constitutional, while others were just trying to make arrangements for decolonisation with the exiting British.

British Decolonisation

Designs and Policies

The British treated their former colonies in two ways. One type of colony, such as India and Africa, was deemed too costly to keep and too difficult to maintain with British forces and British money. These colonies had to be “let go” quickly, but the British kept them in the Commonwealth alliance so that they remained friendly.

The other type of colony, such as those in Southeast Asia, was deemed to still have value. These colonies – Singapore, Malaya, the North Borneo territories – were producing rubber and tin, which still earned the British a lot of money. Although the British knew they had to decolonise these areas, they were not keen to do so too quickly.

It must be noted that while the British did want their former colonies to survive and succeed, the devolution of power by the British was not entirely carried out with an altruistic desire. They wanted to make sure that the fallout from decolonisation would not be too severe for themselves.

Should Southeast Asia become independent, the British, along with the Americans, needed to ensure that these new nations would remain friendly to British and American interests.

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One way to encourage this was to create blocs, treaties or alliances, which came in the form of the Colombo Plan, the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO).

There was, however, another alarming threat arising at the time, that of the Communist movement. There were several Communist uprisings during the 1950s, such as the Malayan Emergency from 1948 to 1960. Communist Soviet Union and Communist China were gaining power and were seen as enemies to the West's capitalist and liberal way of life.

The British devised a plan known as the "Grand Design" to ensure their former colonies would not fall into the hands of the Communists.

The British Grand Design

The Grand Design was ultimately about bringing together all of the British's former colonies. The British planned for Singapore to join the Federation of Malaysia with Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak, where Malaya would be the hinterland.

The Grand Design would achieve many desired outcomes. First, having Malaya as the overall governing body would be beneficial to the British because the Malayan Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was anti-Communist. They would have an ally who would quell any Communist movement. Second, this would also ensure the security of Singapore's naval base if Singapore joined the Federation. Third, politically underdeveloped states, such as the North Borneo territories, could be gradually given political power in various stages, thereby "maturing" them and preparing them for independence from the British.

By virtue of its size, unity and cooperation, the region would be stable when the British devolved power to them.

The Grand Design, however, was problematic. First, there was no timeline. Second, each office in London – be it the Foreign Office, the Commonwealth Office or the Defence Establishment – had different views on how the Grand Design should be carried out. Third, some colonies, such as the North Borneo territories, were not politically ready and would rightly require a more drawn-out process of decolonisation, which London was not willing to accommodate. Fourth, the Tunku was not keen on taking Singapore into the Federation of Malaysia.

The Situation in Singapore

The only place where there was a lot of enthusiasm for the Grand Design was Singapore. In the minds of Singaporean politicians in the 1950s, whether they were from the Progressive Party, the Liberal Front or the People's Action Party (PAP), Singapore had no future on its own. The only way they thought Singapore would survive was if it was part of something larger.

In fact, Mr Lee Kuan Yew was preparing Singapore for merger when the PAP came into power in 1959. Merger was the platform the PAP had built their campaign on. As the first Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee started the Malay Cultural Bureau to educate Singapore on the Malay culture and advocated that Malay be the national language.

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Merger, however, would prove to be difficult to achieve. Though the PAP had won the 1959 Legislative Assembly general elections quite handsomely by taking 43 out of 51 seats, it was not the strong party that it is today. It was made up of the so-called Moderates, who were the English-educated group led by Mr Lee, and the left-wing, more radical group led by Lim Chin Siong.

They had come together because they needed each other. While the Moderates needed the left-wing members because they did not speak enough Chinese or Hokkien to mobilise the ground, the left-wing group in turn needed the Moderates as they did not have a good relationship with the British.

As time passed, divisions grew. Feeling that he was being sabotaged by the left-wing group, Mr Lee called for a vote of confidence in 1961. The PAP Moderate Wing voted “Yes” and the outright opposition, Singapore People’s Alliance and the Workers’ Party, voted “No”. The 13 PAP left-wing members abstained. By doing so, they showed that they had no confidence in Mr Lee. They were sacked from the party and went on to form the Barisan Sosialis in 1961.

This split highlights how Mr Lee and his PAP colleagues were fighting from a position of weakness in the 1960s. It was a fight for political survival – Mr Lee felt that the PAP would lose its political backing unless Singapore managed to join Malaysia.

Singapore – Merger and Separation

The Tunku’s Unwillingness to Merge with Singapore

To the Tunku, Singapore had nothing much to offer. It had no market or industry that was needed by Malaysia, only the strategic naval base that the British had built.

In fact, he had labelled all the Chinese in Singapore as Communists. He also knew that the combined population of Chinese and Indians in Malaya was slightly more than the Malay population, leaving them at a disadvantage. Letting Singapore, with its 1.2 million Chinese majority, merge with Malaysia would tip the scales.

The Tunku had just fought the Malayan Emergency and quelled his Liberal and Communist opponents. However, he still had political enemies who would take any chance to oust him from power, and a Malaya-Singapore merger could provide that chance for them.

Grand Design and “Greater Malaysia”

Although the Tunku was not keen on merger, Singapore fortunately had the British’s backing. They knew that while the Tunku was not keen on Singapore, he was interested in the North Borneo territories because of its oil wells, and especially in Brunei because its rulers were royalty. They presented the Tunku with a deal: Take Singapore and we will give you the rest.

The Tunku’s deputy, Tun Abdul Razak, also reminded him that having Singapore in the Federation of Malaysia would ensure that Malaysia could take justified action should Singapore turn Communist.

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The Tunku, however, wanted his assurances. He only would take Singapore if it was given special status. He did not want to make Singapore a full state as it was too risky. Instead, he would give Singaporeans a Malaysian nationality, but they would be Singapore citizens. This meant that Singaporeans could carry a Malaysian passport but only had rights to vote in Singapore, and not in the Federation. Kuala Lumpur (KL), the capital of Malaysia, would also take over issues of defence, finance, security and foreign relations while Singapore would look after internal matters such as education and labour.

Presented with such a deal, Mr Lee faced attacks from the opposition parties in Singapore, who claimed that he had sold Singaporeans out by making them second-class citizens. After further talks, however, Mr Lee managed to convince the Tunku to refer to Singaporeans in the Federation as “Malaysian citizens” rather just “Malaysian nationals”, although they would still be distinguished as a “Malaysian citizen (Singapore)” in official documents.

With this deal, the advice given by his deputy and the Australians, and further negotiations, the Tunku announced that Malaya would consider merger. In 1963, the Federation of Malaysia, which comprised Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and North Borneo, was formed.

File: Albatross

The period from 1963 to 1965 was also rocky as Singapore and KL did not get along. Mr Lee had intended Singapore to be independent from the British, but attached to a hinterland for economic, social and financial security. Prof Tan posited that Mr Lee saw KL as to Singapore what Washington was to New York.

Although they had agreed not to interfere with each other’s politics, the Tunku came to Singapore to give support to the Singapore United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) who contested in Geylang in the 1963 elections. In return, Mr Lee decided to contest the 1964 Federation elections. Both attempts to win power in the other’s territory were unsuccessful.

However, Mr Lee still had a dilemma. While his heart told him he was still a Malaysian, and that being in Malaysia was the future of Singapore, he was already having doubts.

Prof Tan commented that Mr Goh Keng Swee, in contrast, made his position on merger very clear, describing him as “extremely hard-nosed”. While the merger had promised a common market, special permits to set up industry and other benefits, these promises had not been fulfilled. Mr Goh advised Mr Lee to consider separation as it was becoming a burden to be in the Federation.

With the Tunku and Tun Razak unwilling to speak to him, Mr Lee asked Mr Goh to speak to Tun Razak. Mr Goh did so and created a file entitled “Albatross”, named after the literal albatross that was a metaphor for a psychological burden in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”.

When a final separation deal was brokered, Mr Lee had to keep it a secret from the British, who would have tried to prevent their Grand Design from failing.

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Mr Lee also had to ensure that his cabinet signed the instrument of separation because some members were still against it. Although members like Mr Goh and Lim Kim San were for separation, others like S. Rajaratnam, Toh Chin Chye and KL-born Ong Pang Boon were against it.

To avoid them telling him as a group that he had made a mistake, Mr Lee made them sign the instrument of separation in an interesting fashion. One by one, his cabinet members would enter into his office to sign the document and leave by the back before the next one entered, so that they could not discuss their decision.

Conclusion

In Prof Tan's opinion, Mr Lee really agonised over whether he had done the right thing. In his view, the tears Mr Lee shed when he spoke on television announcing the separation were real. Mr Lee had basically fought all his life to get Singapore into Malaysia and it did not work.

But in the second part of the televised interview, Mr Lee once again became determined. The separation had caused him a lot of "angst", but the nationalist inside him called for Singaporeans to move on, to build Singapore from scratch. And that is what they have done.

Prof Tan concluded by pointing out an interesting trajectory that Singapore was on. Nations would usually develop a nationalist movement, whether revolutionary or not, before attaining independence. Singapore, however, had to become part of another country, Malaysia, before finally gaining its own independence.

About the Speaker

Professor Tan Tai Yong is a historian and the President of Yale-NUS College, National University of Singapore. Professor Tan specialises in South and Southeast Asian History and has published extensively on the Sikh Diaspora, social and political history of colonial Punjab, de-colonisation and the partition of South Asia, and Singapore history. He has authored and co-authored several books, including *From Classical Emporium to World City: Singapore – a 700-Year History* (2009); *Creating Greater Malaysia: The Politics of Merger* (2008); *The Garrison State* (2005) and *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (2001).

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Published by the National Museum of Singapore, an institution of National Heritage Board.

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