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China-Singapore Ties: The Four Rs Behind the Unhappiness

By Shashi Jayakumar

Synopsis

Global Times, published by Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily, recently ran an article accusing Singapore of raising the South China Sea disputes at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit held in Venezuela on Sept 18. What is at stake in this spat?

Commentary

IN PERPETUATING a falsehood - that Singapore had insisted on adding contents endorsing the Philippines' South China Sea arbitration case against China in the final document of the recent Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit - the Chinese media apparatus and the Global Times are twisting facts to pander to their own internal nationalistic constituency and agenda.

The reality is that Venezuela, the host, did not allow regional states to follow the customary practice of settling and updating the relevant regional paragraphs (in this case the South-east Asian portion), despite a combined ASEAN request to the NAM chairman. What happened at NAM was no more, or no less, than the violation of long-established NAM principles.

The 4 Rs in China's Displeasure with Singapore

Now that Singapore has - entirely within its rights - made its stand clear and given the facts, the various intimations coming from the Chinese media and those linked to the state apparatus suggest that they are not, after all, interested in establishing the facts surrounding the NAM, but more interested in registering a deeper unhappiness with Singapore that has been accumulating for some time now.

What, then, is this underlying unhappiness?

Revisionism:

Chinese President Xi Jinping himself has recently said that the United States and China should "cultivate common circles of friends". Singapore intends to be in these circles, friends to both countries. There cannot possibly be objections to this.

Except that there are. China appears to be annoyed by Singapore's influence within the circle of friends that it has. It does not want Singapore to have this kind of influence. To China, only big powers should have this kind of influence, it seems.

Occasionally, some of the true Chinese thinking comes through in the diplomatic arena. At the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum, a senior Chinese official memorably declared: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact."

As Chinese analysts closely tied to Beijing have made clear in recent years, Singapore should rethink its "strategic positioning". One researcher with a Chinese state-linked institution was reported recently as saying that "Singapore should think twice about its security cooperation, especially with the United States, and strike a better balance between China and the US". This is code for simply saying that Singapore should be cognisant of China's ascendancy and future dominance. Singapore, the Chinese argument runs, should "have the foresight" to gradually move away from the US and closer to China.

At the heart of the issue is an attempt to shift the goalposts, and a fundamental lack of respect for Singapore's polite but firm refusal to accede.

Retaliation:

Professor Jin Yanan from China's National Defence University has said that Beijing should impose sanctions and retaliate against Singapore "for seriously damaging China's interests". Speaking during an interview with state-run China National Radio, he said last week: "It is inevitable for China to strike back at Singapore, and not just on the public opinion front... Since Singapore has gone thus far, we have got to do something, be it retaliation or sanction. We must express our discontent."

On one level, this type of talk can hardly be considered surprising. So much of Beijing's current rhetoric is about retaliation. The state-linked media has, for example, said that the US will "pay the price" for its decision to put an advanced missile defence system in South Korea, while one needs to look no further than to Taiwan (where the number of Chinese tourists has reduced considerably) to see an example of soft-power retaliation at work.

At another level, the threat should be taken seriously, even though Prof Jin is not a high-ranking official. Actual retaliation or sanctions cannot be ruled out.

The threat, however, should be seen within the wider context of the strategy of

pressurising smaller nations. We should understand that the coercion of countries attempting to pursue their own independent foreign policies is by no means a strategy confined to Chinese diplomacy. It is a facet of realpolitik at least as old as the Peloponnesian Wars - as its chronicler Thucydides famously noted, "Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must".

The crucial difference here, of course, is that Singapore is not weak. But all the same, the attempts to hit out at Singapore to serve as a lesson to other ASEAN countries; to intimidate them so that they will not dare to speak up.

Resilience:

Fundamentally, then, what is at play is a lack of respect for Singapore's sovereign interests and its foreign policy. Allied to this is the belief in influential circles in China - long pointed out by canny observers - that Singapore is a Chinese country that must cleave to Chinese interests.

Singaporeans should watch for attempts to exert psychological pressure on various parts of the domestic constituency. There is no place for anyone to take an ambivalent stand on this very important issue, and indeed the public needs to be informed on what is at stake.

Singaporeans, thus, will be aware of the realities of big-power geopolitics and the not-so-subtle power play attempt by big powers to exert influence on Singapore, and understand how a sophisticated citizenry should respond. This may be the beginning of a period of sustained psychological pressure with the aim of affecting our social resilience. We should watch out for united front tactics and attempts to recondition the perceptions of the Singapore people.

Just as we have withstood attempts by other big powers, including the US, to bully us in the past, we must be principled even in the face of threats to "punish" us. If we do not distinguish the issues clearly, there might be a serious split in domestic consensus in our island republic on Singapore's independence of action and its future place among regional and international players.

Respect:

Prof Jin also criticised the late prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, suggesting that Washington's rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific should be ascribed to advice given by Mr Lee to US President Barack Obama. Mr Lee had lost Beijing's respect, said Prof Jin.

But Mr Lee did not care for, or want, respect. He was a pragmatist. He wanted to do the right thing - by Singapore. He played no power games and gave advice, when it was sought, to leaders both in Washington and Beijing. These plain facts are known to Prof Jin, but he has conveniently chosen to ignore them.

I have studied Mr Lee's thinking in depth in the course of my research. I was also part of a team that interviewed Mr Lee for the book, published in 2013, that became

One Man's View Of The World, the essential summation of his thinking on geopolitics and world affairs.

We had multiple interview sessions on China - the most devoted to any one country. Never once in our conversations was there the sense of his taking sides between China and the US. Mr Lee hoped for a stable, prosperous South-east Asia and was constantly occupied in our interviews with how this could be done. He recognised the interests of both Beijing and Washington. But he did not once forget Singapore's interests, either. There was substantial overlap, he saw, between the latter and the interests of the two big powers, but they were not the same.

I asked Mr Lee during one of these interviews about one particular incident. During Mr Lee's 1976 visit to China, he met then Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng. Mr Hua tried to present Mr Lee with a book by an academic which gave a slanted, pro-Chinese account of the 1962 India-China War. Mr Lee refused to accept it, saying: "Mr Prime Minister, this is your version of the war. There is another version, the Indian version. And in any case, I am from South-east Asia - it's nothing to do with us."

One might also add: In China's relations with other countries, on a matter which had nothing to do with Singapore, Mr Lee did not want to take sides.

In the Lee Kuan Yew era, a modicum of respect was given to the man and there was a larger willingness by the Chinese to understand the tenets of Singapore's foreign policy - which is to be friends with all the countries who want to befriend Singapore. China could accept these realities those years ago. But now, in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era, this appears to be changing. Singapore will not consent to this. That is the nub of the issue.

In our interviews with him as well as publicly (during the 2011 Singapore Global Dialogue, for example), Mr Lee did ponder aloud scenarios where China might become pushy and aggressive too quickly, attempting to bring forward the day when states such as Singapore are asked to choose sides.

These ruminations now seem prescient. But if it is indeed Beijing's intention to accelerate this scenario, one cannot help but wonder if the right calculation has been made. Forcing ASEAN countries to choose sides would be contrary to Beijing's long-term interests. If so forced, it is unclear whether the divide will be in China's favour.

Singapore has not changed. China has changed. Recognising this fact does not mean bilateral spats will go away. But the recognition itself can help to manage and temper them.

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