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Remembering SR Nathan: The MFA Years

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

Working with and under SR Nathan as a diplomat – rising from recruit to ambassador - was an experience never to be forgotten. He was MFA's institution builder, task master and guru to many who survived his tutelage.

Commentary

FOR THE first generation of MFA officers, S R Nathan was the key figure who shaped their perspectives on the Singapore Foreign Service and the role of the fledgling Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Joining the MFA in 1965 as an Assistant Secretary, he rose rapidly through the ranks and became Deputy Secretary (Political) in 1969. He became the 'go to' person for the political leadership, diplomats posted to Singapore and a younger group of MFA officers nurtured by him.

I joined in April 1970 as part of an intake that year which provided the critical base for MFA in the 1980s and 1990s. Peter Chan, Tony Siddique, Lin Chung Ying, Edward Lee, Lee Yoke Kwang and Michael Cheok were contemporaries. Mark Hong who had joined in late 1969 and Kishore Mahbubani from the 1971 batch were also associated with this group as they were the only survivors of their respective intakes. The 1970 cohort had as great an impact on MFA as the 1979 intake, whose representatives included Ong Keng Yong, A. Selvarajah, Calvin Eu, Simon De Cruz and Robert Chua. The striking feature is that for both groups, S R Nathan was their first boss and his vision, perspectives and approach to the making of Singapore foreign policy and the challenges facing Singapore shaped their thinking. Those who did not make the cut moved on to other careers.

Demanding Boss

S R Nathan demanded crisp, sharply argued assessments 'cutting out all the palaver'. The Prime Minister wanted the essence of the issue in two pages and this was what was provided, using Sir Ernest Gowers, *The Complete Plain Words* as the style book. For recent graduates trained in the social sciences, it required an adjustment in writing styles to focus on reaching the reader, not just winning the approval of academics.

Mr Nathan was a demanding boss. As Singapore was hosting the first Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in January 1971, his inexperienced team of nine officers bore the brunt of responsibility for preparing the briefs for the meeting working late into the night in the weeks leading to the meeting. One of the members (who did not stay long in MFA) was remiss in not destroying spoilt cyclostyled copies as well as earlier drafts and had piled them up next to the cyclostyling machine. Mr Nathan found these copies and wanted to know who the culprit was so that stiff disciplinary action could be taken for the security breach.

The group decided that although it was caused by one of them, we would jointly take responsibility for the error. Mr Nathan was unhappy and threatened a full security investigation but admitted later that it showed that a sense of camaraderie was developing.

Mr Nathan moved to the Ministry of Home Affairs shortly thereafter and became Director of the Security and Intelligence Division of the Ministry of Defence in August 1971. During the years thereafter, MFA stagnated. MFA was barely coping with issues handled by the ministry. It attracted a mixed bag of recruits each year who were often drawn by the glamour of diplomacy rather than any real interest in foreign policy issues. The overall performance of the Ministry was third rate. Mr Nathan returned to MFA as First Permanent Secretary in February 1979 after the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978.

Singapore was facing its greatest foreign policy and security challenge and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had told Mr Nathan that he gave him two years to build up MFA or he would close down the Ministry and make it part of the Prime Minister's Department. Mr Nathan's task was to build up MFA so that it functioned as well as leading foreign services such as the British diplomatic service.

Revamping MFA

In 1979, he started the circulation of Information Notes containing one- to two-page assessments. The first Information Notes on China's invasion of Vietnam were issued by Mr Nathan with the Deputy Directors for International and Southeast Asia.

When the Iran/Iraq War began in September 1980, the Desk Officer Ong Keng Yong and the supervising Deputy Director Michael Cheok flooded the circulation list with quick, regular updates on developing trends in the conflict. Mr Nathan also established a Duty Office headed each week by Deputy Directors on a rotational basis after the Chinese 'lesson' to Vietnam in February 1979.

The China desk staff had gone about their usual Sunday routines and had missed

the reports of the Chinese retaliatory invasion of Vietnam. Mr Nathan was incensed. "You must be seized with the issues" was one of his favourite lines. His view was that Country officers needed to be aware of breaking news developments whether they were in the office or enjoying a relaxing Sunday. MFA must not be caught out by unexpected developments and the Duty Office should alert MFA senior staff immediately.

To keep senior officers briefed on rapidly changing developments, Mr Nathan instituted the practice of 'Morning Prayers' daily at 10am. These meetings lasted for about half an hour and the Directors and Deputy Directors would brief the meeting on breaking news covered by the Reuters, AFP and AP news agencies as well as any information picked up by listening to shortwave radio broadcasts or reports from our overseas missions.

Mr Nathan would provide directions on follow-up action. The result was a ministry whose key officers could respond coherently when approached for reactions to the latest developments. Mr Nathan was blunt in criticising the officers' assessment of the implications of issues raised in their presentations. Once a week, a desk officer would be selected to brief the 'Morning Prayers'. This meant that Mr Nathan could quickly assess whether the officer understood issues within his area of responsibility and grasped Singapore's concerns or was just "dead wood".

Policy Shift

Mr Nathan also instituted a fundamental staffing policy shift. The most capable officers were assigned to MFA headquarters. The best of the 1979 batch of officers had their postings delayed. The effect was that MFA's performance in terms of meeting the requirements of the Prime Minister improved considerably. MFA staff were also taken more seriously in inter-Ministry interactions because there was no longer a revolving door where MFA seemed to be represented by different officers at each meeting because of the policy of posting senior officers to overseas missions. Over time, foreign ambassadors based in Singapore started dealing with MFA directors and deputy directors as they were able to obtain answers and did not have to await a meeting with the Minister or permanent secretary.

Given Singapore's location, Mr Nathan was always focused on Singapore's two closest neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia. He was willing to put MFA's best analysts on these desks, ensured that some of our top officers were posted to these embassies and began the practice of training officers in specialised area studies accompanied by language training.

The terms and conditions of service were also improved in these more difficult embassies as MFA had previously prioritised the cost of living allowances and benefits for staff serving in what were deemed the more expensive postings like New York, London or Paris. As someone whose first job in MFA was that of Malaysia Desk Officer in 1970, taking over as Head of the Southeast Asia division in 1971 (with staff who were all older) and having gone on a Ford Fellowship from 1972 to 1974 for my Masters' degree on no-pay leave to specialise on Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, followed by a posting as Counsellor in Jakarta, I was a beneficiary of this shift in policy.

International diplomacy

As the aftermath of Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia took centre stage in Singapore's international diplomacy, Mr Nathan instituted measures to build up MFA's capabilities in international negotiations and lobbying. Following the setback at the Non-Aligned Summit in Havana in September 1979, where the Democratic Kampuchea delegation was blocked by the Cuban hosts from taking its seat and a vacant seat declared, Mr Nathan met Tony Siddique and me just before we left for New York to attend the 34th UN General Assembly.

He was clear that Singapore would be facing a major challenge in ensuring that the DK delegation continued to represent Cambodia and that there would be a need for strong backing for the resolution which the ASEAN states would be sponsoring. The message was that this was the primary focus of our role at the coming UN General Assembly session. Mr Nathan harboured no illusions and was adamant that this was the only standard of judgement for the performance of the UN team that year.

To complete the picture, India proposed an amendment to the Report of the Credentials Committee at the UN General Assembly calling for a vacant seat to be declared, taking its cue from the Cuban decision in Havana. Instead of the amendment being voted on first, Ambassador Tommy Koh had to argue that the Indian proposal was not an amendment but a completely new resolution which should only be taken up after the vote on the Report. The outcome was very encouraging: 71 voted in favour of the adoption of the Committee's report, 35 against, 34 abstained and 12 did not participate in the vote. This decision was followed by intensive lobbying in the following weeks to win support for the ASEAN position. The ASEAN-sponsored resolution was eventually adopted by 91 votes to 21 against, with 29 abstentions.

MFA's Coming of Age

The Cambodian issue was a coming of age for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. S. Rajaratnam provided the intellectual leadership and spoke articulately at ASEAN meetings, Non-Aligned Summits and Ministerial Meetings and at the UN General Assembly. However, S R Nathan played a key role in institution building and nurturing a band of politically alert and skilful multilateral diplomats. When Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew mentioned to the US Permanent Representative to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick during her visit to Singapore in May 1984 that the Singapore foreign service was like a DC3, slow and reliable, she responded that she thought Singapore diplomats were more like F16s!

Mr Nathan played a critical role in facilitating the formation of the Cambodian coalition government in 1980-81. He met Son Sann of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), In Tam, the Special Envoy of Prince Sihanouk and Khieu Samphan of the Khmer Rouge during their September 1981 visit to Singapore. Mr Nathan told MFA officers that despite their show of bravado when talking about Sihanouk, Son Sann and Khieu Samphan acted submissively in Sihanouk's presence; they crawled to meet Sihanouk. He learnt from his interactions with Prince Sihanouk that Sihanouk saw himself as above the three factions and not as part of

any of them. This recognition helped to shape MFA's interactions with the three Khmer factions as we had earlier leaned more in favour of Son Sann and the KPNLF.

For young MFA officers, the informal learning opportunities often had as great an impact as the formal interactions at meetings or when we were called to see him. He was well known for writing, "Please speak", when he wished to reprimand you or raise a point of clarification. While some of my colleagues went to see him every time there was such a note, others checked with his secretary what his mood was before venturing to meet him.

Some like Tony Siddique would act on issues where questions were raised and keep other files for a few days. If Mr Nathan did not say anything again, Tony would leave a note, "Spoken" next to Mr Nathan's query and file the document away!

Camaraderie Lives On

We learnt informally through discussions over meals when we travelled to conferences and meetings or if, like Calvin Eu, we joined him for his morning walks. Mr Nathan would discuss his experiences at the Conference of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation in Algiers in 1964, the early days in MFA when a North Korean visitor who was the equivalent of the Director of the Asian Division was treated as a state guest as he was introduced as the Vice-President of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and Special Envoy of President Kim Il Sung. He would also share with us the atmospherics during the 1967 meeting in Bangkok which led to the formation of ASEAN and the points to bear in mind in dealing with the requirements of the Prime Minister and other political leaders.

Even after he left MFA, Mr Nathan kept up his ties with those who had worked closely with him. We met from time to time over lunch when he was in The Straits Times. When he was appointed as High Commissioner to Malaysia, he would insist that his former colleagues stay with him if they were visiting Kuala Lumpur, just as he would host lunch or dinner if our paths took us to Washington when he was Ambassador to the United States. He continued to meet us even after he took office as the sixth President of Singapore.

My final meeting with Mr Nathan was at a lunch to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the formation of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) on 28 July 2016. He had a very relaxed exchange with those of us present. After the lunch, he wrote a personal note to each of those present at the lunch. In his note to me, he mentioned our relationship over 45 years. "To have stuck together, through thick and thin and [maintained] this close friendship, working and struggling together, speaks much about the purpose we all shared in our life time. Thank you ever so much for the friendship, faith and support you ungrudgingly gave me. Comradery marked our life and so I hope it will be for the rest of our years."

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