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Review Essay 108

Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore's Grand Strategy*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-981-325-223-3 (paperback, \$32.00)

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Ang Cheng Ang's *Singapore's Grand Strategy* is an engaging, expansive, and empirically rich book detailing the contours of Singaporean foreign and defense policy from its founding to the present. The book is particularly timely. Singapore completed its first leadership transition in nineteen years as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong handed power to his deputy, Lawrence Wong, on 15 May 2024. The transition comes at a challenging time for the wealthy, small, city-state within an increasingly fragmented and violent world.¹ Ang's study is thus particularly timely, centered as it is upon exploring a small state's "grand strategy" as successive leaders navigate the challenges of nascent independence, great power rivalry, regionalization, and an increasingly globalized world.

Ang's stated ambitions in the book are two-fold: to bring the concept of grand strategy to the case of a small power state in Singapore and to provide a diplomatic, defense, and security history of Singapore (151). The book joins a rich but relatively narrow literature on Singaporean foreign and defense policy (11-15). This includes major texts from leading international relations scholars² and many of the leading practitioners on whom Ang centers attention.³ His book, at its core, offers a rich chronological survey of the contours of Singaporean foreign and defense policy under the three leaders over five empirical chapters. Chapters 1-3 center on the Lee Kuan Yew years from 1965 to 1990, parsed out along three areas of focus: chapter 1 on Singapore's relationship with Malaysia and Indonesia; chapter 2 on its relationships beyond its immediate neighbors with a focus on the United States, Peoples Republic of China (PRC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and chapter 3 on the broader substantive issue of its defense policy.

¹ Sebastian Strangio. "Who Is Lawrence Wong, Singapore's Next Prime Minister?" *The Diplomat*. April 17 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/who-is-lawrence-wong-singapores-next-prime-minister/> Last accessed April 17 2024.

² E.g., Michael Leifer. *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Amitav Acharya, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: The Search for Regional Order* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2008).

³ E.g., Tommy Koh and Chang Li Lin, eds., *The Little Red Dot. Vol II, Reflections by Singapore's Diplomats* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2009). Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the Goh Chok Tong Years (1990–2004) and the Lee Hsien Loong Years (2004+) respectively. These chapters are bookended by a brief introduction and conclusion.

Ang's brief introduction sets the stage for the empirical investigations by exploring the concept of grand strategy and justifying its application to Singapore. Ang offers an expansive reflection on the concept, drawing on the work of John Lewis Gaddis, Rebecca Friedman Lissner, William C. Martel, Lukas Milevski, David G. Morgan-Owen, Nia Silove and others.⁴ From this Ang arrives at not a cohesive operationalization of this fuzzy and contested concept, but at a necessarily expansive one that beckons attention to “history, theory, practice, and the military” alongside a narrower reference to “the collection of plans and policies” that were marshalled in pursuit of national interests or “the art of reconciling ends to means” (9). From this broad understanding of what grand strategy is, Ang posits the challenges of investigating the concept as it applies to Singapore. These, he argues, are less conceptual and more logistical, concerning challenges in accessing archival sources given government censorship. This necessitates Ang's reliance on declarations from officials and secondary sources (10-11), an issue I return to below.

In chapter 1, Ang begins with Singapore's 1965 separation from Malaysia and its acrimonious relationship with both Malaysia and the pro-Communist Sukarno government in Indonesia (18). Ang surveys well explored terrain here.⁵ As he shows, survival of the nascent state was the key concern for Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, with a focus on securing water access via Malaysia and establishing defense forces for the newly sovereign state. In considering survival, Ang makes clear that leading statesmen were consistently concerned for the “long-term interests of the nation,” in the words of Minister of Foreign Affairs S. [Sinnathamby] Rajaratnam at the first Parliament (19). This, as we see in this chapter and throughout the book, required a calculated calibration of competing interests, or reconciling “ends to means” as grand strategy (9). In the years immediately after independence, as Ang shows, the crux of this reconciliation was between aspirations of independence with the necessity of interdependence. Ang highlights this tension and its resolution in a number of important instances, including the decision to support hosting British military bases (20; 33-34; 37), Singapore's “prickly” engagement with Malaysia to secure continued access to water (23-4), and the “delicate” management of relations with Indonesia until Suharto's rise to power (27). The final section of the chapter centers attention on the British withdrawal after 1968 and Singaporean support for the Five Power Defense Agreements (FPDA), established in 1971. As Ang argues, Lee's primary interest in the FPDA was to ensure a continued but nominal British or wider ANZUK presence, largely for deterrent purposes and to help make possible economic development.

Chapter 2 retraces the chronology of chapter 1, but expands the scope of analysis to “the world,” centering attention on Singapore's espoused non-aligned status and its relationships with the United States (US),

⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018); Rebecca Friedman Lissner, “What is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield” *Texas National Security Review* 2(1), 2018: 52-73; William C. Martel, *Grand Strategy in Theory and Practice: The Need for an Effective American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Lukas Milevski. *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); David G. Morgan-Owen, “History and the perils of grand strategy” *Journal of Modern History* 92(2) 2020, 351-85; Nia Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy’,” *Security Studies*, 27(1) 2018, 27–57.

⁵ See also Lily Zubaidah Rahim. *Singapore in the Malay World: Building and Breaching Regional Bridges*. (London: Routledge, 2013).

People's Republic of China (PRC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As Ang shows, Lee was guided by an interest in regional and global balance of power (62) and, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, his key concern was to not become "the pawn of an outside power," as Rajaratnam phrased it (53). Lee exemplified this tension in his 1966 "Big and Small Fish in Asian Waters" speech, articulating the need to maintain friendly relations with large and small states alike (60-61). The chapter showcases this impulse and challenges therein. Here, Ang illustrates an inherent tension between Lee's avowedly non-aligned position and Singapore's relationship to the US and UK, including playing host to British and eventually American forces (62), Lee's inviting of US power to the region and support for US efforts in Vietnam (62-63), and his limited support for the Malaysian notion of a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (62). Moreover, while Lee expressed an interest in developing friendly relations within the wider region, he based this upon an appraisal of shared values and principles, an ideological division that shaped Singapore's relationship with the PRC. The latter is evidenced through the divisive discussion around supporting the PRC's admission to the UN. The chapter concludes with reflection on Singapore's participation within ASEAN and, again, Ang paints a picture of reconciliation and necessity. While Rajaratnam and others were skeptical of such regional efforts (72), Lee was more optimistic, largely because he viewed regional institutions as possible means to ends of economic development (73).

Chapter 3 continues the loose chronology to focus attention on the development Singapore's armed forces, from discussions of technological development in the late 1960s to the introduction of Singapore's "Total Defense" policy in 1984. Ang argues this represents a "crucial component/element of Singapore's Grand Strategy" (83), namely a response to the challenges of a multicultural population and driven by the reflections articulated in the 1971 "What Kind of War" speech from Defense Minister Goh Keng Swee. From this discussion, Ang moves back to 1978 and Singapore's response to the "Cambodian problem" and Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (86). Concerned over precedent of a foreign force overthrowing another government (86; 93), Singaporean leaders sought to unite small states through ASEAN to oppose the occupation (87) and solicited American support for ASEAN's efforts in the face of a communist threat (91-92).

Chapter 4 examines the 1990-2004 premiership of Goh Chok Tong. Ang highlights grand strategy as a new generation of political elite took the reins of a now developed state entering a post-Cold War period marked by increased globalization (100-101). In this period Singapore's grand strategy was driven by a belief that "security lies in trade" (101). In the chapter Ang starts with a history of Singapore's economic development from 1965 onwards. Here, he highlights Rajaratnam's "Singapore: A Global City" speech from 1972 as articulating a core element of grand strategy, the link between economic development and security and survival and its progress from a regional outlook to a global one (105). While this linkage is largely implicit in the text, this chapter explores it in detail, and traces the growth of Singapore as a financial "center/hub" (106) and its promulgation under Goh of free trade agreements in the region and beyond, particularly after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (110). The next three sections of the chapter explore wider efforts at multilateral cooperation through the United Nations, the ASEAN Regional Forum, inaugurated in Singapore in 1993 (114), and via growing ties with both the US and China (117) and bilateral relations with Malaysia and Indonesia (119).

The final empirical chapter centers on the premiership of Lee Hsien Loong since 2004, a tenure that began in the wake of the both the “long tail” of the 1997 crisis and 9/11 and the uncertainty brought on by both (128). The chapter presents a quick and sweeping set of appraisals of Singapore’s relationships with other states. Ang first explores relations with US and China (130), which have been largely “smooth” (138) and highlights, in particular, the continued support for US presence in the region and engagement with ASEAN (132). Next, he offers brief reflections on relations with Japan, India, and Australia and highlights, in particular, Singapore’s continued support for expanding Japan’s defensive role in the region (135). Ang then returns to appraise the variably acrimonious relationship with Malaysia and Indonesia from the late 1990s onwards (137). He concludes the chapter by reflecting on both the growing defense activities in Singapore and changes in its regional relations since 2015, in particular highlighting a deterioration of the relationship with China as the COVID-19 pandemic set in in 2020.

The concluding chapter returns to the conceptual terrain of the introduction. It surveys the definitional discussion (151-152) and applies it to Singapore by retracing the contours of the argument presented in the preceding chapters (153). Ultimately, Ang finds that Singapore’s grand strategy was centered on managing affairs with Malaysia and Indonesia and China and the United States, and a sustained and growing commitment to multilateralism on economic and security issues alongside support for international law and institutions (157-58).

As noted, the book articulates two key ambitions: bringing the concept of grand strategy to the case of a small power state in Singapore, and providing a diplomatic, defense, and security history of Singapore. The book, in my view, does the latter more justice than the former. On the question of a small state’s grand strategy, the text could have included more analysis, both conceptually and in terms of questions of method.

On questions of method and methodology, Ang offers welcome and varied reflections on challenges around primary sources, the value of secondary sources, and other pauses in the text that speak to a transparent approach to qualitative research. However, some readers may wish for a more cohesive and developed account. For instance, early in the book Ang notes that he will engage with practitioners “directly or indirectly (through writings and memoirs)” (10) and will center attention on publicly available “declaratory” statements regarding grand strategy (11). This is a necessity, given an inability to utilize classified government (10-11). Ang complements this focus for the pre-1990 period with American, Australian, and British archival sources (11) and draws on the analysis of political science scholars (11-15). But there is little discussion of the scope of these documents or how they are interpreted.

Similarly, in chapter 2, Ang again pauses to reflect on such matters as he defends the focus on three leading men of Singaporean politics: Lee Kuan Yew, S. Rajaratnam, and Goh Keng Swee as the “makers and shapers of Singapore’s grand strategy” (21). This focus is intuitive, Ang notes, given their prominence in established accounts of foreign policy (21-22). And elsewhere in the text we slowly learn that five speeches from these men represent the elements of grand strategy that Ang sees over time (97-98; 104-105; 149). This includes Lee’s “Big and Small Fishes in Asian Waters” (1966), Defense Minister Goh Keng Swee’s “What Kind of War” (1971), and Lee Hsein Long’s “Security Operations for Small States” (1984); Rajaratnam’s “Singapore: A Global City” (1972); and Lee Hsein Long’s “Choice and Conviction” (2015).

Each, we discover through rather piecemeal construction, articulates elements of grand strategy. Why these speeches are taken as signals of a cohesive strategy (and not others), however, are not explicated. More substantively, the relationship between rhetoric and policy and practice is not elaborated. On this, one wonders how, institutionally or socially, three or more leading officials were able to play such a prominent role in that their public statements produced or generated uncontested, elements of strategy put into practice. This is particularly stark given the variation in how policy elites understood key moments in the history on show, for example between Rajaratnam's disinterest in regional institutions and Lee's interest in utilizing them for economic development (72). How and why such divisions were reconciled and how Ang determines the causal role of such preferences and their utterance in statements are less than clear. Finally, within the conclusion, Ang introduces and notes the importance of an "interpretive analysis" (152) of such statements. But what an interpretive analysis is or how it was done is, again, not specified.

Beyond questions of methodology, one can raise questions around conceptual claims, chiefly in terms of "grand strategy." Ang's text does not operationalize the concept narrowly enough for a reader to observe elements of the strategy from the historical record itself. It appears synonymous with *any* policy, or rhetorical statement about policy ambition, that speaks to elements of foreign and defense affairs—a wide breadth of issues and statements, and contains contradictory and varied statements (e.g., regarding the role ASEAN or other institutions ought to play for Singapore when proposed in 1967). Ang notes this as well, "It is very challenging to write about Singapore's Grand Strategy (aka Foreign and Defense policy/strategies)" (10). The challenge is clear in the construction of the sentence itself, where the concept is conflated with both an area of issues and varied forms of their articulation. This renders the ultimate summation of grand strategy rather intuitive: Singapore has traditionally sought a middle and mediate position between its immediate and great power neighbors and to support international institutions that would provide for regional and international stability. It also raises questions about just how cohesive or indeed grand such a strategy is, to say nothing of its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other small or medium sized emergent states of the post-colonial period.

Last, and more narrowly, a number of issues raised in the text beckon more detail as they reveal some important concerns but receive only passing attention. Of course, no book, especially with as sweeping a historical focus as this, can "do it all." But three points seem to beckon further reflection. First, Ang highlights the importance of Singapore's defense efforts not just for deterrent purposes but for nation-building, uniting a disparate society early after the formation in 1967 of the National Service (36). He returns to this in reference to the 1984 Total Defense policy. But in both discussions it is not clear how these elements of the grand strategy affect(ed) societal cohesion or how they influenced subsequent policy priorities or activities. Second, while Ang highlights Lee's support for US efforts in the Vietnam War and the tension between this and his avowedly non-aligned status (63), we see little discussion of how this support influenced grand strategy nor if the US was receptive of such support. Third, much of chapter 3 centers on Singapore's efforts to lead the ASEAN response to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978, but while Ang presents varied positions within the organization, which stem from varied geopolitical commitments, historical relations, elements of culture, and other factors, the varied positions of Singapore's co-members are not clearly articulated nor how Singaporean officials were able to overcome such divisions and make for a productive and consensus-based ASEAN response. On each point, a reader is left wanting more.

All this said, the book's successes and strengths do not, in fact, require a more fulsome discussion of method or methodology nor do they require that reader be convinced of the operationalization of grand strategy and its explication in this case *per se*, nor do we need a detailed account of each interesting thread Ang develops in the wide-ranging empirical chapters. Indeed, this rich and compelling book with much to offer a wide range of readers. It offers a sweeping and detailed account of Singapore's security and defense policy from its founding to the present. Its exploration of the tensions and dynamics as this small state pursues its calibrated strategy in the face of independence, great power competition, emergent regionalism, and an increasingly globalized world will appeal to readers interested in Singapore and the region and those with broader interests in international politics.

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