

China's perception of Singapore: 4 areas of misunderstanding

Tommy Koh For The Straits Times
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What China misunderstands about Singapore is that: Singapore is not a Chinese country despite having a majority-Chinese population; Singapore values a united Asean; Singapore is not a US ally but wants to be friends with all major powers; and Singapore has the world view of a small country.

Relations between Singapore and China are unique. There is no other country in the world with a population in which the majority are ethnic Chinese. Taiwan is not comparable because it is not a sovereign and independent country. Hong Kong is legally part of the People's Republic of China.

ASSET AND LIABILITY

The fact that the majority of Singaporeans are ethnic Chinese is both an asset and a liability in the bilateral relations between Singapore and China. It is an asset because we speak the same language and use the same script, eat similar food and share some common values on education, family, the individual and the state, rights and responsibility, etc.

It is, however, also a liability because it has given rise to unreasonable expectations on the part of China towards Singapore. Many friends in China mistakenly perceive Singapore as a Chinese nation, describing us as "kith and kin". They feel that since Singaporeans are fellow Chinese, we should have a better understanding of China's policies than the other Asean countries. They also expect Singapore to support China's policies. I believe that this is one source of misunderstanding between us. China has to understand that Singapore is a multiracial and not a Chinese nation. Further, as a sovereign and independent country, Singapore's interests are not always similar to those of China.

SINGAPORE'S COMMITMENT TO ASEAN

Another possible source of misunderstanding between Singapore and China is Singapore's commitment to Asean.

Singapore is located in South-east Asia. Singapore's destiny is tied to the destiny of our region. We want our region to be peaceful, stable and prosperous. We want the countries of the region to integrate their economies and to gradually become one community. Asean has played an indispensable role in this journey. Singapore is therefore deeply committed to Asean, to its effectiveness, unity and centrality.



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Any attempt to undermine Asean unity would be regarded by Singapore as a threat to its national interest. This point is not hypothetical but real. Singapore would like Asean to be united and to be able to speak with one voice on any important question, including the South China Sea.

RELATIONS WITH MAJOR POWERS

A third source of misunderstanding between Singapore and China is over Singapore's foreign policy. Singapore's foreign policy is to pursue an independent course and not to be allied to any major power. It is Singapore's ambition to be close to each of the major powers, including the United States, China, India, Japan and Europe.

As tensions have risen between China and the United States, it is increasingly difficult for a country like Singapore, which is on good terms with both, to stay neutral and not be forced to choose sides. Some of my friends in China are not happy with the warm relations which Singapore enjoys with Washington. They have mistakenly accused Singapore of being a US ally and of siding with the US against China.

The truth is that Singapore enjoys warm relations with both Washington and Beijing.

Singapore is not a US ally. If Singapore were a US ally, we could not have broken ranks with the US and be among the first to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Nor would Singapore be so proactive in supporting China's One Belt One Road Initiative. Singapore and China have just embarked on the third iconic government-to-government project, centred on Chongqing.

Singapore believes that disputes between states should be settled peacefully, without resort to force or intimidation. We believe in the primacy of negotiations. However, when negotiations fail, we believe that disputes should be referred to conciliation, arbitration or adjudication and not be allowed to fester.

These are not the actions of a US ally but a good friend and partner of China. Ever since Deng Xiaoping's paradigm shift to open the Chinese economy to the world, Singapore has actively supported China's efforts to build its economy and to modernise. Singapore is today China's largest foreign investor.

DIFFERENT WORLD VIEWS

There is a fourth possible source of misunderstanding between Singapore and China. We have different world views. China is a big country and has the world view of a big country. Singapore is a small country and has the world view of a small country. The two are quite different. Let me explain.

Singapore, like other small countries, wants to live in a world which is governed by laws, rules and principles and not by might or by force. We therefore support a rules-based world order and the multilateral institutions which uphold it, such as the United Nations, World Trade

Organisation, International Civil Aviation Organisation, International Maritime Organisation, United Nations Environment Programme and International Court of Justice.

Singapore supports the rule of law in the world. To small countries, international law is both a shield and a sword. We would like disputes between states to be settled in accordance with international law. In the case of the South China Sea, we would like all states to act in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

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I suspect that, as a major power, China's world view would be quite different from that of Singapore. It is important for each side to understand the world view of the other. Otherwise, China would not understand why Singapore attaches so much importance to international law and to binding third-party dispute settlement.

26 YEARS OF DIPLOMATIC TIES

In 1990, I led the Singapore delegation which negotiated an agreement with China for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Singapore and China on Oct 3 that year. Minister Xu Dunxin was the leader of the Chinese delegation. Looking back over the past 26 years, I am very happy that our bilateral relations have expanded so much in every field. I believe that the friendship between our two countries will continue to strengthen in the coming years.

We should, however, try to avoid misunderstanding each other. It is in this spirit that I have discussed the four possible sources of misunderstanding between us.

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