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# How Singapore's 'smart power' can inspire China-US relations in the run-up to the Trump-Kim summit

Tom Plate says those involved in China-US relations should heed Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's advice to avoid 'us versus them' thinking

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**COMMENTS:**



(America may not be thinking strategically about its relationship with China, or its role in the wider world, according to Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong.)

Illustration: Craig Stephens



[Tom Plate](#)

Next week, it now seems, the American president [will be in Singapore](#), along with the North Korean leader. Both are famously [quirky](#). Is Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong worried? I recently visited Lee, host of the monster summit that – on the off-chance all goes well – could trigger a process for taming the tenor and changing the geopolitical shape of East Asia. Lee, only the third prime minister since the city state's founding and the elder son of the late [Lee Kuan Yew](#), parried my questions from his office in the Istana presidential mansion.

My goal was to understand his take on [Sino-US relations](#), even though, at this writing, [North Korea's ally, Beijing](#), won't officially be attending the Korean summit. "I suppose [the choice of Singapore] shows that we are friends with them [North Korea and the US] and they believe we can do a good job of it," said Lee.

"And it's politically acceptable to them to be here ... [But] they have a very difficult task. This summit is taking place at not very long notice, and without ... extensive preparation or contact between the two sides. It is not easy to make a sudden breakthrough, but it is the first step towards both sides resuming a dialogue."



(Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong speaks at a press conference at the Istana in Singapore on January 16. Singapore has been chosen to host the Trump-Kim summit.) EPA-EFE

Diplomatically, Singapore has tried hard to fashion a happy face for all, far and near, not least the US and China. Some might like to see China collapse; others would like to see the US flop. Singapore is not a member of either group. The reason: it practises "smart power".

Lee is happy the leaders of the US and North Korea are taking this giant step. He believes binary thinking in international relations is a double-edged sword. While it simplifies foreign policy formulation, the "they bad/we good" approach is not productive. Some might like to see China collapse; others would like to see the US flop. Singapore is not a member of either group

Lee says that "It is up to you [the US] how you want to see the world. The question is what conclusion you will reach. Do you conclude that the Chinese have to be like you, in

order to be your friend? Or do you conclude that they do not have to be like you, yet you can still do business with them?

“We do hope that you can come to the second conclusion, because it is not necessary for you to be enemies just because you are different from them. They do not think less of you just because you do not have a Communist Party of the United States.”

Developing nations look at wealthy Singapore, despite its Lilliputian size, and wonder, “why not us?” Its glittering success has all but revised economic development textbooks, inspiring other nations to view it – or Brobdingnagian China – as a model. By contrast, the [American way](#) is not as much in fashion.

“You [Americans] do feel that you have an idea how the rest of the world should be run,” Lee said. “That is very worrying, because if you take a negative attitude to [Beijing] there will be a reaction. They are already suspicious of you, that you intend to frustrate their ambitions to greatness ... The Chinese do not feel they should be sat upon in judgment.”

Lee quickly adds: “The Chinese model is not our solution either, and we have to feel our way forward too because I don’t think our model automatically works [that well] as you move forward.”

When Lee talks of China, I sense his late father’s coruscating, pragmatic spirit hovering in the background, cutting through pretentiousness as he did when I first started writing about Asia decades ago.

Today, just like his father, Lee Hsien Loong mixes realism with respect and worries the US may not grasp the tide of history: “When Mr Trump did his trade sanctions on the Chinese, it may have been initiated by Mr Trump or his administration. But my feeling from our people and just reading the papers, is that it actually has quite wide support in the US. Even [ *New York Times* columnist] Thomas Friedman feels so ... He is not a natural hawk ... So there are people who do not have a lot of time for the Trump administration, who agree with him on this matter.”

Does the prime minister buy the argument that eccentric American leadership can make the Chinese look more cosmopolitan? “Some Chinese think so ... saying this is a strategic opportunity for China as long as Trump is president ... I would not be surprised

if some Chinese officials might have such thoughts as well ... At the same time, they [China] are thinking strategically, whereas I am not sure whether America is thinking strategically about its relationship with China, or its role in the wider world.”



(Chinese President Xi Jinping listens to US President Donald Trump (right) during a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in November 2017.) Photo: AP

Lee is spot on about that. I ask if in the short term the relationship is simply going to yo-yo back and forth, as in the past, or whether a fundamental cleavage is starting to push China and the US further apart?

“It does not have to go that way. But from the [trade frictions](#), it can easily develop into a wider mistrust. Because now, it is not just trade, exchange or currency exchange rates, but you are also [blocking their investments](#), more than before. If you do not want to run a trade deficit with them, yet you do not want to sell them what they want to buy – either companies or [strategic goods](#) – then what is the outcome?”

Lee deserves to be listened to carefully, as was his thoughtful father. Ignore their wise input on China, and disaster beckons, even if the upcoming summit by itself is a roaring success.

**Columnist Tom Plate recently visited Singapore and Jakarta. The Loyola Marymount University’s Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies is the author of Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew**

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