

# SINGAPORE: PM LEE ON THE SUMMIT, SINO-U.S. RELATIONS, TRUMP AND TARIFFS, INDONESIA – AND CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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TOM PLATE WRITES – Next week, it now seems, the American President will be in Singapore, along with the North Korean leader. Both are famously quirky. Is Lee worried? We pay a call on the city-state’s prime minister, host of a monster summit that – on the off-chance all goes well – could trigger a process for taming the tenor and amending the geopolitical shape of East Asia. Lee Hsien Loong, only the third PM since the city-state’s founding and the elder son of the late Lee Kuan Yew, parried my questions from his office in Istana, the official mansion preserved from British colonial times.

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TOM PLATE’S INTERVIEW WITH SINGAPORE PM LEE HSIEN LOONG

MAY 22, 2018

(embargoed until 5pm Monday)

Plate: Let's get it over with: Thoughts on the possible summit between these two fun characters [the US and North Korea]?

PM: We are happy to be useful and helpful. I think they have a very difficult task. This summit is taking place at not very long notice, and without very deep and extensive preparation or contact between the two sides. It is not easy to make a sudden break-through, but it is the first step towards both sides resuming a dialogue.

Plate: What a fine thing for Singapore to be selected as a site. Not for the work you will have to do, but for your image.

PM: I suppose it shows that we are friends with them and they believe we can do a good job of it. And it's politically acceptable to them to be here. I think that's good for us.

Plate: There's a North Korean embassy here in Singapore?

PM: There is — there are three or four people.

Plate: So, that's another possible reason they might have thought of Singapore as acceptable.

PM: Well, I don't know. I'm sure they have embassies in other countries too.

Plate: Yeah, that's true. More than Americans think. Americans forget that they are a member of the United Nation and a sovereign state ought to have their own red buttons.

PM: Big ones too.

Plate: Do they?

PM: Well, that's another matter. There are many sovereign states that don't have red buttons.

Plate: You don't have a red button?

PM: I have no comment.

Plate: I saw something in a famous western newspaper a very good article on the US and China, but it has this headline and I want to know what you think of it. "How the West should judge the arising China." Did that hit you in any odd way?

PM: I didn't see that.

Plate: Yeah, it was in a very good paper.

PM: "Judge" meaning assess? "Judge" meaning "sit and judge me"?

Plate: "Judge" is more than assess. I mean I can assess your educational system but if I want to make a judgment about it, that's value-adding a little.

PM: It depends on the nuance. But there is that tone, and the Chinese do not feel they should be sat upon in judgment.

Plate: I am weird because, even though I am an American, I agree with that. Why should we be condescending?

PM: But you do feel that you have an idea how the rest of the world should be run.

Plate: Your late father was generous to me with his time and his insights. He once told someone that the reason he bothered with Plate was that he was the first American journalist who interviewed him who did not try to tell him how to run Singapore.

PM: It is up to you 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.

Plate: Also because our own party system is working so well now.

PM: I wouldn't want to comment on that.

Plate: Right now in Washington, I am told — I'm based in Los Angeles — it's almost impossible to say a positive word about China.

PM: 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 Thomas Friedman feels so.

Plate: Friedman doesn't know Asia.

PM: Maybe. But 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. That is the problem.

Plate: You are absolutely right. In America I am considered almost pro-Beijing. In Asia, I am considered in the middle, moderate.

PM: That is very worrying, because if you take a negative attitude to them, there will be a reaction. They are already suspicious of you, that you intend to frustrate their ambitions to greatness. This just proves it, and it is self-reinforcing.

Plate: It was reported in the American press that [at the White House last month] you had a conversation with our President about the illogic of tariff retaliations and so on.

PM: I did not discuss that with him, I wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post. We had other things to talk about.

Plate: How did that conversation go, alright?

PM: Which conversation?

Plate: The one where you talked about other things.

PM: That went fine because he was coming to Singapore, planning to at that time, for the Summit with DPRK [12 June]. We expressed our support and hoped that it would go well and that it had our full cooperation.

Plate: I didn't realize until your press secretary told me that the summit day is scheduled just two days before his birthday.

PM: I didn't know that. Is that a good omen?

Plate: I think it is actually. He must be tired of Mar-a-Lago in Florida by now ... Let us talk about Singapore. ... I think per capita, you probably have the highest IQ of any country in the world, so I love coming here and talking with your people. I was looking back to a YouTube video of 2011 when George Yeo gave his last press conference as an MP and said: "This is a new phase in Singapore's political development. We must engage young people, must never stop adjusting to change or we will be changed." Is there a sea change going on in Singapore now?

PM: I do not know about a sea change, but I think there is a secular change. It is progressive, it is inexorable, and it is a totally different generation grown up in a different environment, post-Internet. The world is their oyster, at the same time, they worry that we may be constrained in Singapore. How do we reconcile their ambitions and aspirations with the realities and the compromises which we have to make, while keeping them engaged and continuing to do their best, and not giving up their ambition or hope, and keeping their support? I think that is a big challenge for any political party. You look at so many countries, the organised political parties find their support base gradually drifting away and people go to extremes or radicals or insurgents. If that happens to Singapore and we cannot maintain a consensus of the clear majority of the population, for leaders whom they trust, whether PAP or otherwise, I think we will be in very serious trouble. The other countries have not inconsiderable difficulties – British, Germans, in America too, establishments parties have gone to the extremes.

Plate: America's a political mess right now....

PM: So, what is the model? ... 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 as you move forward.

Plate: Speaking of leadership issues, Indonesia which very few Americans understand as remotely as well as Singapore does — how very important Indonesia is, for all kinds of symbolic reasons, Islam and everything else ... They recently suffered this suicide attack on Catholic churches. And Ramadan can be an opportune time to be awful if you are a terrorist. The Islamic State, around the time of Ramadan last year, claimed to have triggered over 300 separate attacks worldwide. Talk about a little bit about Indonesia? I would think you worry about that almost as much as anything.

PM: They have had stable presidents for a while now – they have had Megawati [Soekarnoputri], Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Jokowi [Joko Widodo]. These are moderate centrists, holding the country together and grappling with the complexities and the contradictions. They do not completely smooth everything out but they are not heading in the wrong direction. The economy is growing by five to six per cent, so there is some prosperity and considerable dynamism. If you go to Jakarta, you will find it is booming and its tech sector particularly, is almost like a bubble but there is a lot of energy, companies, start-ups. It is like Silicon Valley in a small sort of way. There are positive things going for it, but of course it is a very big and complicated country to govern, and extremist terrorism is one of the problems. It will not turn the system upside down, but it is a significant security threat. One which the government finds quite hard to deal with. Both because they cannot get proper anti-terrorism laws passed in the parliament.

Plate: They cannot?

PM: They cannot. They have tried. It has been before Parliament for a long time now. It does not quite go through. Also because in a Muslim country, it is very difficult for them to tackle Islamist extremists without antagonising the general population.

Plate: Right. That is the belly of the beast.

PM: They have people like Abu Bakar Bashir, who said, "I make many knives, I sell many knives but I am not responsible for how they are used." So, that is a problem they have and therefore we worry about it too, because there are interconnections and the terrorists look at us. Some of the extremists think of us, target us

and are near us. Even in the islands, just across from Singapore, across the Straits of Singapore. The other thing we worry about is connected to this and that is political Islam. It has always existed but it has never become dominant. But it has become more prominent. In the last Jakarta gubernatorial election, the incumbent, a Chinese, was accused of blasphemy based on an edited video, and the Muslim groups mobilised against him. From an unassailable lead, he lost the election and ended up in jail for blasphemy. The President himself has been accused of being non-Muslim on the grounds that his name, amongst other things, that he is called “Jokowi”, and “Wi” proves he is Chinese! He had previously had to go on an Umrah, a mini Hajj, in the middle of his own Presidential election campaign to prove he was a Muslim. So these trends are not in keeping with the historical pattern of Indonesian society. It is worrying.

Plate: I am on the same wavelength. I am not hysterical yet, but I am worried.

PM: On the terrorism part, we are quite worried. They are taking it quite seriously in terms of counter-terrorism, meaning fighting terrorists. They have an anti-terrorism combat force. They are very professional. They have gone in, done hits and knocked out a lot of bad guys. But the ideological fight and dealing with people whom they arrest and put away is not satisfactory. When they put people in jail, the people who are in jail can receive visitors, they have handphones and they sometimes hold press conferences and organise attacks. The man believed to be the de-facto leader of the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) group, who is on trial, and they are asking for a death sentence – has masterminded attacks from behind bars, and they happen.

Plate: That’s not the way to run a country.

PM: Compared to what might have been when Suharto fell, and the future looked most uncertain, it is not a bad situation that they are in. But these are things we worry about.

Plate: If your country is a little too small, theirs is a little too big and sprawling.

PM: Yes, it is four or five time-zones. Anything happens anywhere, the President is answerable.

Plate: People say to me, “Why do you like Singapore so much?” and there are a lot of reasons. One of the reasons I say is, “I do not know, it triggers my inner authoritarianism.”

PM: We are true democrats.

Plate: Yeah, I know. As long as you win! ... I think you once said something like this: The problem with politics is that it gets in the way of the time and energy to do good government. You said something kind of like that?

PM: I believe that. You direct your energies at one another. It is not in a constructive way to solve problems, but really to try and put the other person down, and show yourself superior. You look at Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, or the New York Times and Donald Trump.

Plate: That is an interesting parallel.

PM: The New York Times would say they are publishing the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But they do have a stance.

Plate: The problem is “one man one vote” where you do not get the result of the “one man one vote”, so you have that system we have that was designed to protect demagogues from getting in and so we get someone who could arguably be more like that. The other problem you have is quality control on your top people.

PM: Which you used to have in the smoked-filled rooms and that does not happen anymore.

Plate: That is right.

PM: That is not the only failure mode. Even without the Electoral College, you could have a majority vote elect somebody who is a demagogue. It can happen. (Marine) Le Pen one day could win in France.

Plate: Absolutely. The country [the US] is completely split down the middle.

PM: It is split and also, it is geographically split. That means the frontiers become disproportionately powerful in your Electoral College.

Plate: That is exactly right. I am not allowed in my family to say anything positive about Trump. Because if I do, my wife kicks me out and I sleep on the curb. I cannot even laugh at a bad joke. It is like that in America. In fact, he is the President of the United States. In fact, he was elected constitutionally.

PM: We have to work with whoever is the POTUS. So does (Angela) Merkel, so does (Emmanuel) Macron, so does (Theresa) May, so does (Vladimir) Putin and Xi Jinping.

Plate: Do you buy into the Western media argument, that the generation of the American leadership opened up the spaces for the Chinese to look more cosmopolitan?

PM: Some Chinese think so. Prof Yan Xuetong, who is a scholar at Tsinghua, is on record saying this is a strategic opportunity for China as long as Trump is President.

Plate: They think that.

PM: Well, he thinks that. I would not be surprised if some Chinese officials might have such thoughts as well. They are worried about their bilateral relationship and managing the trade and other frictions. 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.

Plate: We are not. You are absolutely right.

PM: I am sure the Chinese are. They are planning and they are acting.

Plate: China 2025, they are really serious about it.

PM: I think they are serious about building up their technology, their industry, and their new capabilities. I do not know how successful they will be. The Japanese have tried this and it did not turn out great for them. But the Chinese are putting a lot of resources on it, and they have a lot of bright people. Whether they can convert that into an outcome, I do not know. It is a competitive situation. It is understandable that other countries are anxiously watching to see what happens. I am not sure there is a basis to say that they are offside when they do this, because other countries want to do this too. You do it within the rules, there is nothing to prevent you

from doing it, and it should not be a cause for conflict. You may discuss and say, “Let’s come to an agreement”, like between the US and Europe on Boeing and Airbus. Let us agree what level of support we will give, and how we try to have some degree of openness in the market outcome. But you cannot say that the Chinese are offside and against the rules when they do these things. Or that that is the reason why you have to start a trade conflict with them.

Plate: Some of the things we do but have been challenged in the WTO. We have lost them.

PM: There are some of the things that the Chinese have done – they have been challenged and they have lost too. We should build up the WTO rather than try to knock it down. The WTO dispute resolution panel is down to the minimum number of judges now because the appointment of judges is blocked. This means trade disputes which come up are queuing up to be heard, and if one more judge retires or his term ends, no more disputes can be handled by WTO. The US wants to deal bilaterally – I talk to you one-on-one, we are best friends, and please understand my interest. I can understand this might be an attractive approach from the point of view of the issue, if you can get the other chap to come to the table. The US is trying that with Mr Abe in Japan. But if you do that across the board, and that is your fundamental strategy for dealing with the world, then you are really fundamentally changing your role. The US used to say: I hold the ring, but I uphold rules, and my goal is to create rules where countries can prosper and the US can prosper with them. I do not think that this Administration believes in that approach anymore. I think (Robert) Lighthizer has explicitly said he does not.

Plate: Basically what they believe in is some kind of retrenchment.

PM: I do not think they want to pull back. What they want to do is to win one-on-one and win every single battle. Because they see that as a win and lose.

Plate: In the short term, would you say the relationship is going to yo-yo back and forth like this, or do you see fundamental cleavage starting to surface between China and US?

PM: 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?

Plate: We do not want to fill Christmas tree with really cheap toys. We want American people to pay more for those toys.

PM: The American people do not quite realise they are paying more for the toys. The people who do realise are the farmers who are trying to sell to China soybean and beef.

Plate: Personal question, but not too personal – you were awarded the Harvard MPA, but I went to Princeton, but I respect you anyhow.

PM: Thank you, so do I.

Plate: I do not believe that, but it is very nice of you to say that.

PM: It is okay, I believe you.

Plate: You are quite interesting and thoughtful on the issue of education. Has your experience in America at all helped to make Singapore education better or is Singapore education so sui generis because of the kind of society you are in?

PM: I have not experienced your schools; I have experienced your universities, though Harvard is not a typical American university. What I have seen is that in America, your universities are able – the best ones anyway – to attract people from many countries and are very open in their connections. Connections to business, connections to start-ups and connections to government. So it is permeable. People go into Washington, next Administration they come back, recharge, and hope they have a chance to go out again. Or if you are MIT or Stanford, then you have lots of new ideas and your students go out and do start-ups. Even Harvard students drop out and become Microsoft or Facebook. That is a tremendous strength. Whether we can do that across the board with a much wider range of talent in our universities, compared to your top ones, that is harder to say, but we would like to foster that ethos and generate that pursuit of excellence. Something approximating to that kind of excellence at the peaks, for our best students in our own universities, so that they are challenged, they

are inspired, they do something which is off the beaten path and break new ground. I think that we can do at the university level. For the rest of the system, our strategy is to provide a good education for people across the board, adapted to their abilities and interests. Whether you are a top student, whether you are a so-so student, the course is tailored to you and helps you go to your maximum potential, and employably so.

Plate: One of the worst things about the media is of course its tendency to generalise, trivialise, be cheesy. Do you think that Singapore today is less tight as a whole than it was say thirty years ago?

PM: I think we talk about more things, we are more open to all sorts of currents and winds which come in. It is unavoidable with the Internet and international travel. We have to adjust to that, and hold together in that more open environment. It is more challenging because we do get pulled in different directions by external influences. Different directions meaning the forces generate tensions within Singapore society and we have to hold together despite that. Whether it is the influence of China or India, or whether it is extremist terrorism, or whether it is western Liberal versus Conservatives mores, these influence us differentially.

Plate: In this connection, I find myself at this time in life, at a Jesuit university (Loyola Marymount University). The reason that is so hilarious is that although I was baptised a Catholic, almost from an early age, it was a downhill slide. Fallen is an understatement of my state of religion and my soul.

PM: So are you redeemed yet?

Plate: I have talked to Jesuit priests about it and they said it would take a huge package deal. It might be in the same magnitude of difficulty as Korean peace! You are Catholic?

PM: I am not Catholic; I went to a Catholic school.

Plate: Is there anything in that education, in terms of the values or ethics that you think was a positive that you feel is good for Singapore and it is just a good thing in general?

PM: They did not try to convert me. Some of the students were Catholic, some were not. Quite a number of the teachers were Catholics but they left us (alone). We did say the Catholic prayers every day before school, so I can still say them.

Plate: Is that right?

PM: Yes, the Lord's Prayer, the Catholic version, and also the Hail Mary – "Hail Mary, full of grace ...". We used to say this every day and we crossed ourselves too, without thinking too much about it. But the main reason my parents sent me there – and they deliberately chose a Catholic school – is because this was a time when some Chinese schools were infiltrated by left-wing activists. They wanted to make sure I went to a school where I would not get captured and brainwashed, and then come back and denounce my parents. The Catholics did a good job, they made sure there was no such left-wing cell in the school. And they gave me a very good education.

Plate: I thank you for the time.

END

Columnist Tom Plate recently visited Singapore and Jakarta. Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies authored 'Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew.'