

Echoes of a tumult... from South-east Asia 50 years ago

Looking back at a 50-year time arc, we may today borrow wisdom and take courage for the times ahead



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Brace yourself for another year of tumult. Geopolitical shifts are ongoing between one great incumbent power and another emergent. The United States faces conflict abroad as well as sharp divisions domestically. Across our region, countries face pressures from both outside and within, with many political and social divisions. The pandemic adds to these pressures and accelerates a number of trends.

That sounds like today. But save for the pandemic, it also describes end-1970, 50 years ago. The geopolitical shift was from the British, marked by the troop withdrawal from their last base in Singapore in 1971. The new power, the US, was increasingly mired in the Vietnam conflict, with the anti-war opposition movement growing at home.

Across the region, many governments struggled with communist movements and internal divisions. The economic, social and developmental challenges of “nation-building” were also high priority, especially for the newly independent countries, including Singapore.

What echoes 50 years on? What has changed?

Looking back, it is humbling how no one saw the pandemic coming. Back in January, predictions were for a relatively good year. Even into end-February, few anticipated the global-scale impacts. Some now turn to a longer arc of history in thinking of what may be ahead, with analogies like the Great Depression and Cold War.

For me, there are also personal reasons. Towards the end of 1970, my late father Tay Seow Huah gave a talk at a seminar on “South-east Asia Today”. He was then the director of the Security and Intelligence Division, reporting to our first-generation leaders on the external environment. Re-reading his essay, similarities struck me, even as differences are notable. History does not repeat itself, some say, but it often rhymes.



A farewell parade on Oct 29, 1971 at Kangaw Barracks in Sembawang, where the Union Jack came down in Singapore for the last time, marking the end of British military command here and signalling a geopolitical shift. ST FILE PHOTO

GREAT POWER SHIFTS AND SINGAPORE

In 1971, the withdrawal of British troops from Singapore punctuated the end of Empire and a geopolitical shift. “Today, British power... is no longer the size as it was in the 50s during the Emergency,” my father remarked mildly. “The involvement of outside powers cannot be ignored. The region has from the earliest times been subjected to outside influence and intervention.”

Many steps were needed to prepare for that change, and urgently, including the pressing need to establish an army, with the unorthodox and low-key help of Israeli advisers.

As a child, I remember many “Mexicans” – as these advisers were euphemistically referred to – coming around for dinners and informal chats. I also recall my father taking us to Seletar to a small shack just outside the British camp that sold fish and chips said to be the closest and most authentic version available, and then later the flurry of interest in trying A&W, the then new American chain.

In 1971, my father was sent to the US on a six-month Eisenhower Fellowship to get to know the country better.

With the British departing, Singapore stepped up efforts to engage the new superpower, with

the then young Lee Kuan Yew building a relationship that strengthened from the Nixon administration to endure and grow over many decades.

Today, the conventional wisdom is to look at the US as the guarantor of security and status quo power. Yet doubts arose in the 1970s, as conflict in Vietnam deepened and internal divisions sapped American political will.

My father took the view that “the precise magnitude of the change in US policy that will occur is still not clear and would depend to a large extent upon changes in US domestic attitudes”. Now again, we hear echoes of that as the US struggles with social and political fissures amid suggestions that it is a country in decline. Global impacts can flow from America’s domestic contestations.

THE CHINA QUESTION

Many today also look to China, emerging earliest and strongest from the pandemic. Back in 1970, China was watched mainly through the lens of Cold War concerns and its support for communism in our region.

My father worried that China’s intention was “to change the present status quo... which means essentially the removal of the American presence and the evolution of indigenous regimes”. Not all in the region would be



The writer’s late father Tay Seow Huah was director of the Security and Intelligence Division.

swayed but the concern was that countries would adopt, “at the minimum, a China-leaning neutrality and therefore permit a considerable Peking influence in the entire area”.

No one foresaw the surprise of 1971, when US President Richard Nixon announced he would visit China. Fifty years on, the Sino-American relationship has never been more important to the world, and China’s influence across the region has grown dramatically.

Even with a new Biden administration coming into office, the US is expected to continue to regard China as a strategic competitor and rival. Some believe a new Cold War is at hand, in which countries of our region will again be pawns or – to reuse the imagery of the 1970s – dominoes. Others can hope for limited cooperation in areas like climate change and the global fight against the pandemic. But no one currently predicts a bold step like that taken by Mr Nixon.

The coming years may well be pivotal, especially given the uneven effects of the pandemic

and if China accelerates in recovery, relatively.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

There is little Singapore can do directly about the largest geopolitical concerns. That was true in those earlier years, and remains true today. Yet positive steps have been taken and more options exist, compared with the past.

Ties with both the US and China have developed broadly, deeply and positively. With China, since the end of communist insurgencies and from Deng Xiaoping’s visit to Singapore in 1978, the shift has been fundamental – from mistrust to broad areas of cooperation and partnership. The slew of agreements between the two countries early this month would have been unimaginable in earlier decades.

Singapore has emerged as a key node in Asia of value to the great powers and others across the global community. With the ongoing pandemic, that cannot be taken for granted. Yet this role can be reinforced if we manage the situation well internally and reconnect safely, but also as quickly and widely as possible. The decision of the World Economic Forum to hold its 2021 summit here is just one example of what can be done.

Relations with neighbours, too,

have improved dramatically. In 1970, Asean was still nascent with tensions among its five founding members – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – even as a Cold War line divided them from North Vietnam.

But whereas Vietnam in 1970 was feared as an expansionist power, it is today an investment darling. While Myanmar in that era was under military rule and autarkic, there is now democracy and openness to the world. Comparatively, while far from perfect, current efforts to integrate the Asean community create many economic opportunities and offer more political ballast and space amid great power rivalry – somewhat as the Non-Aligned Movement of the 1970s tried to do.

Today’s level of investment and growth in the region was unforeseen in 1970, when some predicted the region would Balkanise. Ties with Japan have also grown dramatically after anti-Japanese demonstrations in the mid-1970s and, since the Fukuda Doctrine of 1977, Tokyo has become perhaps the most consistent partner for South-east Asia.

Looking at the developing and often newly decolonised countries of the region 50 years ago, the concerns stemmed not only from the Cold War but also from internal challenges. My late father warned: “Many of the internal problems... will not lend themselves to quick or easy solutions. The efficiency of the administrative apparatus and the quality of the leadership will continue to be varied.”

Many of those internal challenges continue into the present. Indeed, they are further complicated by the pandemic, with citizen demands escalating for healthcare, economic assistance and equity.

The challenges of the 1970s were not overcome by overnight silver-bullet solutions. The path forward was neither simple nor without bumps and setbacks. Key strategies may be usefully recalled: Preparing for geopolitical shifts and engaging the major powers; expecting tumult in the region with many governments preoccupied with national issues, and yet finding ways to work together; emphasising efficiency of government and quality of leadership; increasing resilience and preparing contingency plans for the unexpected.

The year ahead will not be the same as 1971, just as 2020 was not 1970. Analyses and policy prescriptions will differ from those that served a pioneering generation. Yet, looking back at a 50-year arc of time and the distance Singapore has come, we may today borrow wisdom and take courage for the times ahead. Much has been faced and overcome, and can be again.

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