

Entretien avec S.E.M. York Chor Tan, ambassadeur de Singapour en France.

DI: Your Excellency, Singaporean diplomats have the reputation to be very tough negotiators and experts to make positions built on contradictions appear coherent. However, it is often difficult to understand clearly the official lines of Singapore's Foreign policy on various matters. Is "the art of complexity" a necessity for a State-city like Singapore to defend its political and economic interests in an uncertain strategic environment dependent on great powers?

Y.C.T.: Singapore does not pretend to have a sophisticated Foreign policy. As a small country, Singapore is exposed to the world and has no choice but to engage the world, with a dose of hardnosed realism and balanced with pragmatism. We also try to stay alert and nimble in order to take advantage of opportunities as well as to stay out or get out of harm's way. Since Singapore's Independence, our basic principle of being open to cooperate with all countries, big and small, and all institutions that wish to cooperate with us, has served us well.

DI: Experts describe Singapore as "the silent power" of ASEAN. The country often seems to have a low-profile attitude in the organization. Regarding its diplomatic and economic importance, nothing serious can be decided without its resolved commitment, but its political implication is quite passive. Few ambitious initiatives in the regional-building process are supported by Singapore. Do you agree with this analysis? How do you explain this position? What are the objective interests of Singapore in the regional-building process?

Y.C.T.: I will take these two questions together. Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has been a cornerstone of Singapore's Foreign policy. It plays a central role in forging norms of cooperation, and promoting peace and stability in the region. An economically integrated ASEAN is also crucial for promoting the growth and competitiveness of its members in the region and globally. This is why Singapore plays an active role in ASEAN's community-building efforts.

We are a strong supporter of greater economic integration within ASEAN and strengthening more linkages between ASEAN and the broader region through important initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Singapore is also a strong advocate of ASEAN Connectivity. A more connected ASEAN through more infrastructural, institutional and people-to-people linkages will facilitate deeper economic integration.

Nonetheless, we have to balance ambition with realism in ASEAN's community-building efforts. Southeast Asia is a vastly diverse region and due to intrinsic differences between ASEAN Member States in fundamental areas such as political and economic systems, it is not possible to achieve complete integration or a union in all areas.

We will continue to work other ASEAN Member States to promote integration in a way that broadens our common ground while reflecting the diversity of the region.

DI: What are the feelings of the Singaporeans towards ASEAN? Is the idea of a better regional integration popular? Do you observe rising signs of regional solidarity concrete representations among the population?

Y.C.T.: More Singaporeans are aware of ASEAN today due to increasing efforts to promote public awareness of ASEAN. For example, activities such as Model ASEAN Summits and ASEAN Youth Camps have been held in Singapore. Such activities will grow in importance as ASEAN becomes more integrated, with more impact on our peoples' lives. Thus, there is scope for us to do more in this area. For example, we could help Singapore and Singapore-based businessmen, including EU companies, better understand the opportunities arising from an ASEAN Economic Community.

DI: Are regional security matters still a core priority for the Singaporean government as it was after the September 11 period? Among the population, is the feeling of being exposed to an important potential threat still high?

Y.C.T.: Regional security has always been a top priority for Singapore and ASEAN. For example, as of March 2013, all ASEAN Member States have ratified the ASEAN Convention on Counter-terrorism. Besides issues like counter-terrorism, other non-traditional security issues such as cyber crime and disaster management are becoming increasingly important. ASEAN and other ASEAN-led forums such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus are becoming more active in promoting more regional cooperation in these emerging areas. ASEAN prioritises the maintenance of regional peace and stability in order to sustain investor confidence and promote conditions for economic growth. Disputes should be resolved peacefully and all parties involved should exercise restraint to avoid ratcheting up regional tensions.

DI: Singapore and Malaysia have developed complex relations since 1963. However, even if many problems still remain to be solved, the building of a timid “smart partnership” seems to be the new credo of the leaders of both countries. This shift triggers some critics against the government in Malaysia, accused of “giving up the sovereignty of the nation to Singaporeans’ interests”. What is the perception in Singapore of this evolution? Is it unthinkable to imagine in a close future a kind of “advanced association” between the two countries?

Y.C.T.: Singapore and Malaysia share a unique and somewhat complex relationship. Bound by a common history, our ties are multi-faceted with close cooperation across a number of sectors. In particular, our rapidly expanding economic interdependence is a strong reason to continue enhancing these relations.

Our trade figures are just one example of this. Malaysia is Singapore’s largest trading partner, with total trade amounting to S\$113.4 billion in 2012. Similarly, Singapore is Malaysia’s second largest trading partner after China, with bilateral trade valued at RM175.5 billion in 2012.

At the same time, both countries are constantly seeking new areas of collaboration. We have embarked on joint venture projects in Iskandar Malaysia and Singapore and we are studying how to improve connectivity between both countries. Relations are excellent, and there is immense potential to improve bilateral cooperation. We fully expect ties to grow from strength to strength.

DI: How do you describe the nature of the current relations between Singapore and the Western countries? Is the nature of these relations particular with the United States?

Y.C.T.: Singapore enjoys good relations with the Western countries in general. We have good relations and regular exchanges with European leaders, members of parliament and officials. We work closely with our European counterparts on a wide range of issues, such as trade and investment, defence, education, culture, transport, energy, climate change and science and technology. Singapore’s relations with the European Union and its member states have been growing across a broad range of areas. We have strong, institutionalised relations with the larger countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, and deepening relations with emerging economies in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Black Sea regions.

The Singapore-US relationship is a close and enduring one based on shared interests and a broad convergence of views. It covers a broad spectrum of areas, including economic, defence and security cooperation, and is underpinned by the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (USSFTA) and the Strategic Framework Agreement. The USSFTA was the first FTA between the US and an Asia-Pacific country, and has supported business engagement between our two countries for a

decade. On the defence and security front, Singapore is happy to provide US forces with access to our military facilities to facilitate the US' continued presence in and engagement of the Asia-Pacific, which is something we have been a longstanding advocate of because we believe it contributes to regional peace and stability. We are also working with the US through the Singapore-US Third Country Training Programme to enhance the capabilities and potential of countries in our region.

DI: Is the European Union a regional integration model, positively or negatively, for the Asian elites and especially for the Singaporean ones? How do you analyse the current difficult situation of Europe? For you, what are the deep reasons of this situation? Do you see lessons that could be useful for Southeast Asia?

Y.C.T.: The circumstances of and *raison d'être* for the formation of the EU and that for ASEAN were different. The EU was established to bring Europe together as a community after the Second World War. However, this was not ASEAN's original intention. There are clear divergences in the political systems and economies of ASEAN countries, and the organisation is made up of many disparate countries that had come together. One lesson that ASEAN has learnt from the EU is that ASEAN needs to be clear about the extent of its integration efforts. ASEAN's aims for regional integration are a lot more modest than that of the EU's. The goal is for ASEAN to have a common market for goods, services and trade, as well as closer physical connectivity, and not to the extent of the EU's integration where there is a common currency in place. ASEAN recognises that a political union among the 10 AMS, along with other measures such as common financial standards and regulations, is perhaps not a realistic prospect for now. We are optimistic about Europe. The reality is that the quality and standards of living were much higher in Europe than in Asia. Europe also has significant economic achievements, and a high level of skill and technology. We have no doubt that Europe would be able to resolve the issues that they currently face.

DI: How would you describe the nature of the current relations between Singapore and China?

Y.C.T.: Singapore and China enjoy a strong and multi-faceted relationship anchored by frequent high-level exchanges, robust economic cooperation and close people-to-people ties. Our leaders maintain frequent exchanges. In 2013, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Ministers Teo Chee Hean and Tharman Shanmugaratnam, as well as Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong visited China, while China's Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli and Foreign

Minister Wang Yi visited Singapore. China was Singapore's third largest trading partner, with bilateral trade increasing threefold over the last decade to reach S\$103.8 billion in 2012. People-to-people exchanges are growing, with 1.5 million visitor arrivals from China to Singapore from January to September 2012, an increase of 23% over the same period in 2011. Going forward, there are many areas where Singapore and China can continue to exchange ideas on and learn from each other's approaches towards tackling common challenges.

DI: How is the growing influence of China seen in Southeast Asia and by the Singaporean leaders? For them, this situation is rather a constraint or an opportunity? In every Asian country, the feelings towards the hegemonic status of China in Asia are quite contrasted. In some countries, the Chinese territorial claims, but also the Chinese economic power, are sources of fears or distrust in certain categories of the population. What is the situation in Singapore? What are the perceptions of China by the people? Is there a kind of consensus regarding the good or the bad image of the country?

Y.C.T.: Singapore sees China's growth as a major plus for the region and the world. China is now the world's second largest economy and the top trading partner of many Asian countries. Over the last few decades, China has become a major player in the global trade system and international order, and has become highly interdependent with the rest of the world. China has benefited from the stable external environment, as this has allowed it to continue to focus on its domestic priorities. We believe that a prosperous and stable China that is well-integrated into the world community is a major force for peace, prosperity and stability in Asia and the world.

DI: The Sino-Singaporean community is the most important among the Singaporean population. What are the effects of this situation on the relations between Singapore and China? Is there a “Chinese socio-cultural factor” that enables easier or closer ties? On the contrary, are the State logics more important than these socio-cultural aspects?

Y.C.T.: In this modern world where connectivity is important, the ability to network carries a premium. Singapore has a multi-racial make-up as our forefathers had come from many places in the region as well as beyond. Our different races have learnt through the years to live and work together, turning our cultural and linguistic diversity and familiarity into a strength that has enabled us to network widely, with people from both our immediate region of Southeast Asia, China and India, to the Middle East and the West. The diverse links which Singapore and Singaporeans are able to forge across the region and the world has not only helped opened opportunities but also enhanced Singapore's attractiveness as a global city. For instance, Western

companies looking for opportunities in countries in the region as well as in China and in India can consider using Singapore as a bridge to these countries.

DI: For Malaysia and Indonesia, the possible concrete implication of the Chinese navy in the Malacca Straits' security control missions is a diplomatic and strategic "red line". They have strongly reaffirmed their opposition to this recurring China's claim. The position of Singapore on this question seems more ambivalent. Is there a clear official doctrine of the Singaporean government on this matter?

Y.C.T.: I would take it that your question is about the presence of foreign militaries in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

Singapore, as a maritime state, is a strong proponent of navigational freedoms as enshrined under UNCLOS. These include the right of transit passage through Straits Used for International Navigation (SUIIN) such as the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. Commercial and government vessels, including naval vessels of other states, are entitled to exercise the rights of passage through the SUIIN in accordance with the conditions provided for under UNCLOS. However, like all other states, we would react accordingly should a naval vessel of another state enter Singapore Territorial Waters in breach of passage rights under UNCLOS without our consent.

DI: For Singapore, what are the main challenges in the near future?

Y.C.T.: As is the case for many countries around the world, Singapore is faced with an increasingly complex and challenging environment both at home and externally. This translates into a greater need for Singaporeans to remain cohesive and work together to face these challenges, including the issues of social equity and ageing population. Many new complex issues traverse different ministries and agencies, necessitating ability for different organisations, and indeed the private and public sectors, to work closely together. Going forward, Singapore needs to evolve, to upgrade its productivity, innovate and build new industries and capabilities so as to keep competitive and relevant. Otherwise, why would anyone in the world choose to do business with Singapore when there are thousands of other cities around the world to choose from?