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Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore Bloomed in the Shadow of the Cold War

Singapore's rise can't be separated from the context of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

By **Wen-Qing Ngoei**
March 28, 2017

Vigorous debate over the legacy of Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has continued since his death on March 23, 2015. Many credit Lee's 31-years at the helm of the country (1959-1990) for vaulting Singapore from a "slum-ridden trading post" to a global metropolis. Others criticize what they consider Lee's authoritarian tendencies, contending that he squashed his political opponents by labeling them communists and detaining them without due process. Indeed, Lee admitted in a 2010 interview that he had done "some nasty things, locking fellows up without trial," but argued that his was an "honorable purpose" since these "fellows" were communists intent on hijacking the democratic process. Thus, some believe that Lee's allegedly authoritarian ways brought Singapore wealth and security, and Western observers should question if their political freedoms actually trump the material comforts that Singaporeans enjoy.

These views overstate to extent to which Singapore's economic boom was a function of Lee's so-called authoritarian rule. It's a tempting conclusion to reach — Lee's presence dominates Singapore's history as an independent nation, and Singapore got rich while other countries of the global south fell behind despite oodles more natural resources. This prompts some to call the city-state exceptional. But this narrative holds Singapore's history separate from its Southeast Asian neighbors, from the vortices of decolonization and the Cold War. It presumes that Singapore's success arose from causes within its boundaries, from the domestic policies of Lee and his colleagues when Singapore exited the Malaysian Federation in 1965.

Analyses of Lee's tenure typically overlook how much Singapore benefited from the Cold War. In fact, Singapore's economy enjoyed a running start because Britain clung to its air and naval bases in Singapore for decades after World War II, hoping to buttress Britain's status as a world power. Britain's Singapore bases underpinned its Cold War military commitment to the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). And as the CIA learned in 1967, Britain had been pumping almost \$200 million annually into the Singapore economy to maintain its military installations on the island. These bases contributed 20 percent of Singapore's national income, providing employment for 36,000 Singaporeans. Current Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has stated that Britain's withdrawal from the bases in the late 1960s actually threatened the livelihoods of 150,000 Singaporeans.

It wasn't just that Britain refused to leave. Lee and his colleagues valued the bases' economic contribution. Lee even strove to deflect the criticisms of non-aligned leaders that the British bases made Singapore a neocolonial puppet. In the early 1960s, he visited the major non-aligned leaders of Asia and Africa to convince them that British forces remained in Singapore only at the pleasure of Singaporeans, that he could turn the British out at any time. Most non-aligned nations accepted Lee's argument because he was persuasive and, anyway, many non-aligned states maintained similar military ties with their former colonial rulers or had forged new ones with one or more of the ascendant Cold War powers. However, Indonesian President Sukarno continued until he was ousted (between 1965 and 1967) to insist that Britain's Singapore bases served British neocolonial designs. Sukarno remarked in his autobiography: "Colonialism wasn't retreating in my backyard, just changing shape." But absent significant resistance from the non-aligned world against Britain's Singapore bases, the country enjoyed additional years of the fading empire's bounty.

When Britain finally relinquished its Singapore bases in 1971, Singapore did not lack for a new, powerful and rich patron. Singapore thrived as a something of a war economy as America, the USSR, and China engaged in their proxy war in Indochina. In 1967, a full 15 percent of Singapore's national income derived from U.S. military

procurements for Vietnam. Furthermore, Singapore served as Southeast Asia's regional petroleum-refining center, crucial to the U.S. war machine. Lockheed Corporation had set up shop on the island for commercial reasons as well as to repair and maintain aircraft being deployed for the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. More American monies flowed into Singapore as the Vietnam War ground on. In 1971, U.S. officials found that American private investment in Singapore had begun to grow at a phenomenal \$100 million a year.

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Here, too, Lee played an important role. He repeatedly cajoled U.S. leaders to support the Saigon government. After his first official visit to America as Singapore's prime minister in October 1967, Lee wrote President Lyndon Johnson that his support for the U.S. war in Vietnam was "unequivocal," that it bought time for states to stabilize their governments and economies. Traveling throughout the United States that October, Lee continually told the American press that Southeast Asia would accommodate to communism if America abandoned Vietnam. Johnson valued Lee's support and promised to "keep on a steady course in Vietnam." Lee later cultivated relations with the Nixon administration, promising to persuade the American public not to "sell out" Saigon. American troops would fight in Vietnam till 1973. Several extra years of U.S. military procurements (and rising numbers of American companies setting up in Singapore) certainly helped the Singaporean economy, too.

Lee's strategy for Singapore in the Cold War was not exceptional. Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman also cleaved to America as British power waned; he supported the U.S. war in Vietnam and tried to win more American investment. Thai military elites resolutely aligned their country with America from 1950 onward and reaped many rewards. For his part, Sukarno claimed he was non-aligned but strung all the Cold War powers along to access their war chests. Likewise, while Lee and his colleagues toiled over domestic policies to drive Singapore's economic development, they readily exploited the transnational conflict that buffeted all newly

independent nations. Most non-aligned nations tried their hands at this game during the Cold War; Lee and his lieutenants happened to play it quite well.

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