

Missing Lee

Regional politics loses its sharpness with LKY's passing

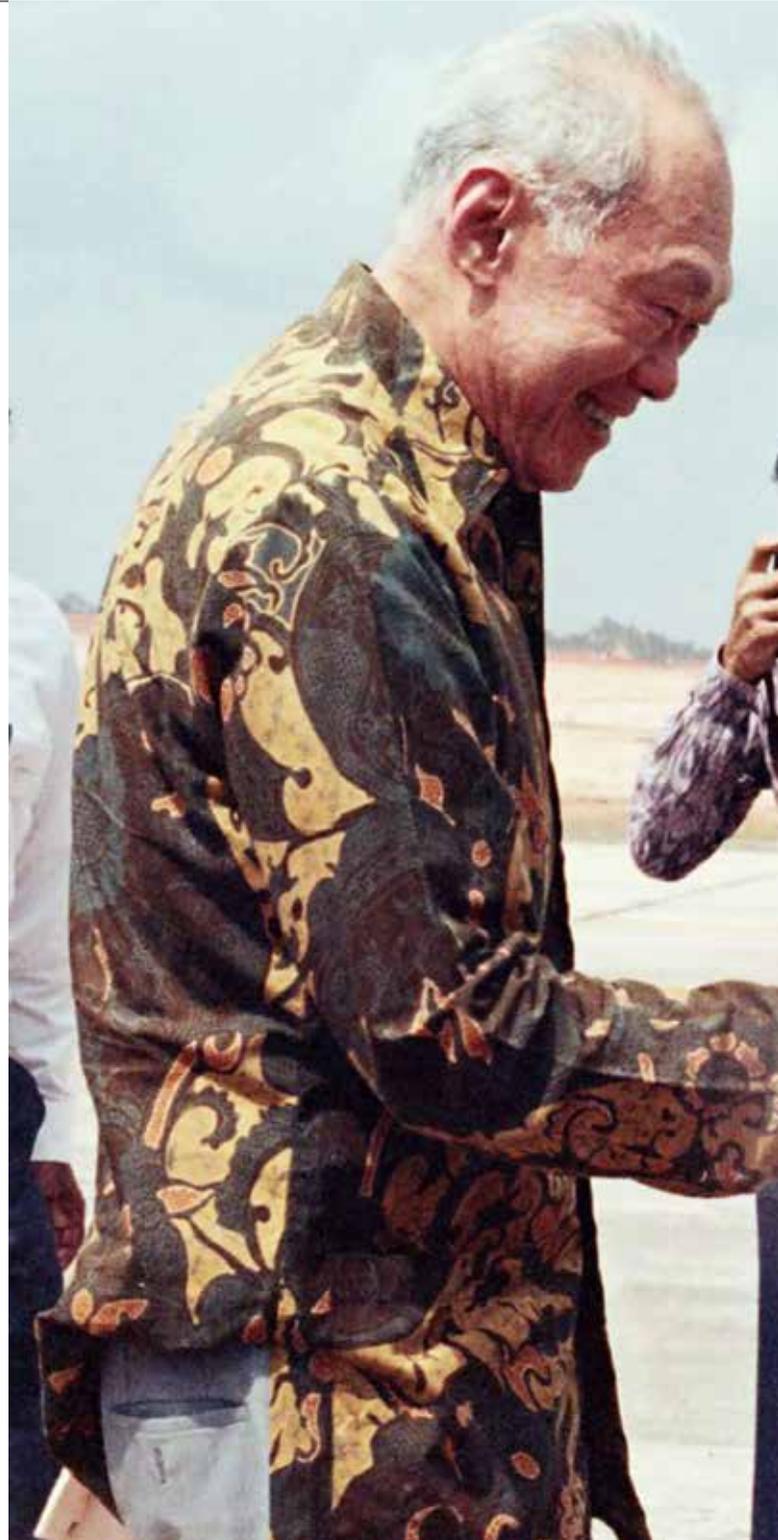


))) By BRIDGET WELSH

From Lee Kuan Yew's expulsion from Malaysia in 1965 to his development of Singapore as a global model, his style and governance went well beyond the city-state. LKY was an Asian statesman who worked to stamp his brand and control over foreign relations as much as he did at home.

LKY operated in the era of strongmen, from his sparring partner across the Causeway, Mahathir Mohamad, to his diplomatic engagement with Indonesia's Suharto, Cambodia's Hun Sen, Burma's Ne Win and China's Deng Xiaoping.

Arguably more than the others, LKY stood out for his foreign policy acumen, winning friends for his strong views where others





Indonesia's President Suharto (R) shakes hands with Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at the Halim Perdana Kusuma Airport in Jakarta on August 28, 1990. – Reuters

made enemies.

He promoted a mutually acceptable realist global platform, the combination of pragmatism, security and economic growth that were the ingredients of international cohesion. He welcomed foreign investment, giving others a convenient base in Southeast Asia to make money.

While he should rightly share the foreign policy accomplishments with his People's Action Party (PAP) team, notably Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam, LKY supported the formation of ASEAN and played an important role in building the regional architecture that set Southeast Asia on its own path.

Among the best examples he set was in the 1980s with his ability to accommodate a rising China without alienating the United States.

If there was a place where LKY grated, it was among his closest neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia. His anti-Malay comments and the historical context of how he assumed office,



Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (R) talks about his office to Singapore's visiting Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in Putrajaya, 30 kilometres south of Kuala Lumpur, on September 4, 2001. Lee arrived in Malaysia to resolve a string of long-running disputes between the two countries. – Reuters



China's Premier Wen Jiabao (L) and Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew applaud during the launch of the Business China programme at the National University of Singapore on November 19, 2007. – Reuters

President of South Africa Nelson Mandela (R) shake hands with Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew (L) on March 5, 1997 after he arrived in Singapore for a two-day visit. – Reuters.





notably not of his own choosing, forged a personal antipathy with his neighbours that often became a war of words. This was particularly the case with Malaysia, but Indonesia was not spared.

This dynamic went beyond personal acrimony, as it had to do with staying in power. The

neighbours became targets for each other to shore up political support at home, from issues of race relations to economic performance.

It also had to do with LKY's style of governance. He was arrogant in his country's success, often implicitly comparing Singapore with its neighbours.



Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (R) bows with Singapore's Ambassador to Japan Chin Siat Yoon and his wife Wang Lee Moi (2nd R) after signing a condolences book for the late former prime minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew at the Singapore Embassy in Tokyo on March 24. -Reuters

This dynamic spoke to the underlying trauma of Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia, but it also was a part of LKY as a man; he was not averse to telling others what to do.

This fed resentment among leaders in the region and their citizens. Some felt that LKY wanted his neighbours not to succeed, to be bastions of corruption so that Singapore could shine.

Singapore's efforts to strengthen authoritarianism in the region, be it with Myanmar's military or with Suharto's Indonesia, and to give financial haven in Singapore's banks to those who engaged in graft had a similar galling effect. LKY projected a parvenu image that Singapore was about Singapore, not the region, at least among those closest to the city-state.

The soft authoritarianism that LKY built in Singapore did gain traction in Asia. The Asia Barometer Survey of 2010-2013 surveyed citizens' choices of which East Asian country to follow as a "model", and Singapore along with Japan, China and the United States ranked highly.



Thailand's former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra signs a condolence book for mourners dedicated to the late Lee Kuan Yew at the Embassy of Singapore in Bangkok on March 25. – Reuters

The findings show that countries farther from Singapore, notably Taiwan and China, had the most affinity with the Singapore experience. Under the Deng era, Singapore served as an example, with officials regularly visiting the city-state for study missions. Even in Indonesia and Malaysia, there was an appreciation of Singapore's success.

The least affinity was found in Hong Kong, arguably Singapore's main competitor in financial markets, and in the Philippines, where relations during the LKY era soured over the controversial (and still remembered) hanging of domestic worker Flor Contemplacion in 1995.

Although LKY was no longer prime minister then, his role as Senior



Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak (L) and wife Rosmah Mansor (2nd L) pay their respects to Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew as he lies in state at Parliament House for public viewing ahead of his funeral in Singapore on March 26. Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, one of the towering figures of post-colonial Asian politics, died at the age of 91 on March 23. – AFP

Minister and his public defence of her execution for murder alienated Filipinos. As he was at home, LKY was respected, but not loved.

LKY's passing marks another strongman leaving the political scene in Asia. Regional relations are that bit less personal, less colourful and less contentious.

Increasingly, conflicts are played out behind closed doors, in

theatre-like meetings by trained professionals, lacking the public performance of the past.

The move to more routine may in fact bring a different pattern of stability to the region, one that is not based on personal ties, but that most certainly takes away the sharpness that LKY brought to the international arena.

