



## The China-Singapore Row & Sino-U.S. Rivalry

by Eric Teo Chu Cheow

The visit of Lee Hsien Loong (then deputy prime minister and now PM) to Taiwan in early August sparked an exceptional row between Singapore and China. Although both countries have long recognized Singapore's "special relations" with Beijing, this visit provoked Beijing's wrath to an extent that surprised Singapore and its ASEAN and Asian neighbors. In the aftermath of this "crisis," Beijing cancelled a series of bilateral visits and exchanges, from officials and ministers to students and journalists; China even threatened to derail the start of Sino-Singapore Free Trade Agreement negotiations scheduled for later this year.

Although Beijing's ire could be explained by sensitivity to a visit to Taipei by a deputy prime minister (which was perceived by Chinese leaders to have encouraged Taiwan's "independence forces"), there are indications from officials and academics in Beijing that China's grievances went beyond the Taiwan issue. In particular, there are Beijing's accumulated frustrations with Singapore's perceived "increasing tilt toward the United States" when Beijing's leaders are increasingly wary of American strategic intentions and policies toward China.

Beijing sees signs of the "U.S. tilt" in Singapore's eagerness to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Washington (just as China was wooing ASEAN through an ASEAN-China FTA), and Singapore's pledged support for the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. (Singapore has sent logistical support for a limited time to Iraq.) Then, Singapore's support for a U.S. proposal to send its troops to help patrol the Strait of Malacca shocked the Chinese, who quickly supported neighboring states, Malaysia and Indonesia, as they tried to block this U.S. initiative. Some in Beijing even criticized Singapore for not cooperating with the rest of Asia, and some perceived Singapore as having joined Japan, Taiwan, South Korea and Australia in the "pro-U.S. and anti-China coalition in Asia" and helping to form a de facto "arc of containment or encirclement" against China.

Beijing has begun its own charm offensive toward Singapore's immediate neighbors within ASEAN and has successfully strengthened relations with Malaysia, Thailand, and even Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, in an attempt to "counter" the U.S. presence in the region and thus "pacify" China's immediate region. This effort resembles China's imperial tributary system under the Ming and Qing emperors, which was based on trade, respect, and stability.

This thinking or mentality behind China's ancient tributary system seems visible in recent geopolitical trends emanating from China and is in accordance with its own theory of "peaceful rise," and the discreet (until now) attempts to reduce the U.S. presence and influence in the Asia-Pacific

region. Beijing has put forward its own vision of Asian regionalism and community building, which appears to aim at excluding the United States from this region, which Beijing (as in the Ming/Qing times) may once again consider its own "backyard." Four factors contribute to this rising tributary trend and mentality.

First, China needs to stabilize its immediate neighborhood externally, as in Ming/Qing times, to build its own nation internally. The linkage of "internal" and "external" stability (*neiwun* and *waiwun*) is crucial to China's own development; but in this regard, to allay fears of an aggressive superpower China in the making, the Chinese leadership seems to have opted to drop the phrase "peaceful rise" (*heping chueqi*) and is instead using "peaceful development" (*heping fachang*) to appease Beijing's smaller Asian neighbors, which may fear the rise of a tributary system.

Second, Beijing is increasingly concerned with securing natural resources and raw materials for its rapid economic development. The search for energy and raw material sources and logistic routes have become paramount in Beijing's international economic diplomacy. Although the Chinese economy should cool this year, thanks to a reduction of investment growth from 26.9 percent in 2003 to a more reasonably estimated 15 percent, its economic growth for the next few years could still be maintained at an impressive 8 percent per annum; this rate is deemed necessary to provide urban employment and maintain social peace. Beijing is thus bent on securing energy and raw materials to maintain its growth momentum (for internal stability reasons); the first circle of energy sources is in its immediate neighborhood, which is Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar.

Third, China is fearful of being "strategically encircled" by the U.S. and its allies, which could then restrict Beijing's economic growth and its rise. The fear of the U.S. blocking its energy access routes, like the Malacca Strait, reached alarming proportions in Beijing's own internal calculations; this explains its frustrations with Singapore. Beyond this energy problem, Beijing is growing more concerned that Washington is building an "anti-China coalition" around its periphery, thereby limiting its access to the Pacific. Theater missile defense is part of this strategic concern, just as the Taiwan issue is perceived by some in Beijing as U.S. "leverage" to destabilize China internally and in the region.

Last, to achieve these objectives – build stability in its immediate region (as in Ming/Qing times), ensure economic sustainability (and hence social peace), and prevent the strategic encirclement of China by the U.S. and its Asian allies – Beijing has deployed a formidable diplomacy to build its own system of allies and friends in the Asia Pacific. Beijing's role in the six-party talks on the Korean Peninsula, its on-

going talks for an ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement by 2010, its recent spectacular hosting of the Third International Conference of Asian Political Parties (the ICAPP brought together 350 delegates of 82 political parties from 34 Asian countries) and the exceptionally warm welcome extended to leaders of Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam to Beijing (during and after its bilateral spat with Singapore), testify to its efforts in coalition-building in the Asia-Pacific region. What is probably most significant in the ICAPP is the pragmatism of the Chinese Communist Party in bringing together such a diverse group of political parties, as well as the equally pragmatic approach taken by other Asian political parties. Remember, many in Southeast Asia openly opposed Beijing's communist ideology in the 1960s and 1970s. A new order (of Asian proportion) appears to be in the making for China in this region, within the context of its "peaceful development."

The increasing Sino-U.S. rivalry in the Asia-Pacific and Beijing's efforts to woo its smaller neighbors and build its own "system" or coalition in Southeast Asia suggest the outlines of a China-inspired "Monroe" Doctrine, though it is far more subtle and discreet than the U.S. version. China is reportedly intent in organizing an Asian security system conference in Beijing this autumn along the lines of Europe, after snubbing the annual Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore for two years. Another development is the recently concluded defense cooperation between Philippines and China, despite their on-going differences over South China Sea islands and the Manila-Washington military alliance. This coalition-building by Beijing is reminiscent of the mentality of China's

former imperial tributary system, which effectively stabilized China and Asia from 1644 until the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese leaders seem to be reviving an ancient system, which was based on trade (mutual), respect (for China) and stability (for the region).

Sino-U.S. rivalry can be expected to increase dramatically in the Asia-Pacific. Taiwan, Japan, the Korean normalization process, Southeast Asia, South Asia (and especially India), Central Asia and Australasia would thus be foci of competition between Beijing and Washington. This rivalry will spill over from the economic and cultural spheres into the political and strategic arenas, and China's smaller neighbors could all be eventually "sucked" into this growing rivalry, as Beijing attempts to assert or reassert its pre-eminence within the Asia-Pacific region and eventually challenge U.S. presence and influence here. As trade, investments, and people-to-people exchanges increase regionally and become progressively centered on China, Beijing would logically want to "manage" its "own" Asian system, and thus increasingly frown upon the existing U.S. presence and any U.S. attempt to "lead" Asia.

*Dr. Eric Teo Chu Cheow, a business consultant and strategist, is Council Secretary of the Singapore Institute for International Affairs (SIIA). He can be reached at [sldeet@singnet.com.sg](mailto:sldeet@singnet.com.sg)*