

This op - ed by Prof. Tom Plate appeared on The Straights Times on December 27, 2015.

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Political leadership is not for parlour intellectuals



Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew welcoming Deng Xiaoping to Singapore in 1978. Lee would always declare Deng the greatest leader of the many he met in his half-century at the top tier of Singapore's successful government. ST FILE PHOTO

Do Asian political leaders need to be strong? Machiavellian? This veteran journalist who has interviewed quite a few - from Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad to Thaksin Shinawatra - distils the essence of Asian leadership.

Tom Plate

Do so-called "larger than life" individuals make history, or is it history that makes leaders seem larger than life?

This age-old question rises to spectacular relevance and prominence when examining both Asia's inclination towards soft authoritarians as well as the West's often-thoughtless response to such archetypal leadership. Before exploring the attributes of leadership in Asia, let us first turn to a seeming digression that illuminates the leadership phenomenon of our times.

Back when I was a social-science major, I viewed my greatest professors with awe. There was Earl Latham and George Kateb at Amherst College, as well as Richard Falk and George Kennan at Princeton University. These capacious minds refused to imprison history behind the bars of mathematical modelling or bracket out professorial judgment even in the face of social-science data, should it seem marginal or dubious.

In considering the vital role of leadership, certainly with regard to Asia in the post-war era, quantifiable social science tells us only so much. I, along with my former professors, would agree with the late Noel Annan, Cambridge don and champion of Isaiah Berlin, who once put this matter rudely: "Social scientists have depersonalised acres of human experience so that history resembles a ranch on which herds move, driven they know not why by impersonal forces, munching their way across the prairie."

Bad strong leaders have hurt Asia as much as good strong leaders have transformed it. Strong leadership benefits nations when those leaders evidence a special transformative character.



Perhaps that is harsh.

Social scientists do tend to glaze over the unquantifiable force of personality in history, but in fairness it must also be stipulated that journalists often dwell on it precisely because it is so visible, accessible, and indeed assessable as it were, on the surface. We political journalists overuse the word "leadership", as if an answer for nearly everything, and elevate "charisma" to the status of some overriding magical elixir when, in fact, charisma is more of a media construct than anything strictly quantifiable.

Even with this admitted, there is a problem for the serious journalist analysing Asia, and it is bluntly this: The astonishing economic rise of Asia over the past few decades cannot possibly be understood without spotlighting national leaders and appreciating their particular leadership styles.

Trying to imagine India without the peculiar impacts of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru is not remotely possible. Try, for example, putting on your thinking cap about modern China without giving a thought to Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping or Zhu Rongji; or viewing post-war Japan while leaving out Yasuhiro Nakasone and Akio Morita; or examining tiny Singapore without the endless ego of Lee Kuan Yew or the sure-handedness of his son; or studying Vietnam without Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap; or evaluating sprawling Indonesia without leftwing Sukarno and rightwing Suharto.

For a most recent example, consider Myanmar in the absence of Aung San Suu Kyi who, at the time of this writing, is so triumphant in Myanmar.

It simply cannot be done. Asia cannot be evaluated without understanding how the region's leaders think, assume, judge, decide and react.

STRONG LEADERSHIP IN ASIA:

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Asia's dramatic rise since decolonisation has correlated with outstanding leaders. New nations thrown out on their own and forced to start up from near ground zero with poorly established or non-existent institutions, except possibly their armies, necessarily drafted special leadership.

Power, as we all know, does abhor a vacuum, which is exactly the kind of vacancy made to order for the political ego that believes destiny drafts him or her

to occupy it - and to convince people to follow behind in good order. Asia's deeply ingrained cultures - Confucianism, Buddhism and Asian Christianity - all welcomed "soft authoritarians" with open palms.

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Of course, the paradox is that just as concentrated power can advance development, it can also advance the kind of corruption that impedes economic growth. Without a single-minded commitment to national development, leadership marinates in demagoguery or degrades into mere dictatorship as an administration's gains wind up in secret offshore bank accounts maintained in relatives' names or numerical sequences, rather than in people's hearts, pockets and memories.

Unless rigorously monitored by exemplary leadership at the very top - such as in Singapore with the graft-free People's Action Party - powerful central governments are prone to either demagoguery or rank corruption, as has been the case in the People's Republic of China. It is telling that the current government of President Xi Jinping has prioritised corruption control to a higher degree than any predecessor in recent memory. Despite such cases of demagoguery and corruption, the sickening looting syndrome seems in general slightly truer of other continents than Asia.

On balance, strong leadership was an advantageous quality for much of Asia, particularly in those nations emerging from the colonial period. For example, two historic, under-assessed Asian leaders were Sukarno and his successor Suharto.

These late Indonesian strongmen inherited from the Dutch a sprawling psychedelic archipelago of a country that is about as manageable as the quarrelsome General Assembly of the United Nations.

Both Sukarno, who emerged from the left with communist tendencies, and Suharto, who emerged from the military right with fascist ones, had many grave and embarrassingly obvious flaws; however, these men were "giants" in the sense that they held together the political psychedelia thrown into their laps from the Dutch as they fled their colonial outpost after World War II.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT STRONG LEADERSHIP IN ASIA

It is difficult for most Americans to accept that strong leadership in the context of authoritarianism should be considered successful. In most educational institutions, Americans are taught democracy as a system of government - not as a philosophy or psychology of citizen participation.

Americans validate the democratic process even though our elections produce "results that are erratic", as Lee Kuan Yew once deftly put it. It is an American assumption that public debate, aided by a media unencumbered by government control, will drive superior public policy, as Jurgen Habermas imagined it. Asian leaders do not often take that view, to put it mildly.

As Americans - the worst of it being with the Western media and, to some extent, Western academe - our particular cultural ideology impedes a sensitive understanding of other political cultures. In my opinion, American cultural insight is particularly handicapped with regard to largely Islamic countries. Understanding the governance of an Islamic political culture requires examining its leadership in a different way than Americans view their own leadership. Governing a neo-Muslim country such as Malaysia is a qualitatively different challenge from governing a secular or multireligious one.

Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad, originally a country physician, served for 22 years as prime minister of a country with a population that was approximately two-thirds Islamic. And yet, Malaysia during Mahathir's strongman rule from 1981 to 2003 was anything but a hotbed of Islamic terrorism. Instead, the country developed rapidly - including a good measure of Westernisation in its acquisition of technology and Silicon Valley-type start-ups. The Mahathir era was quite remarkable, but it was not until 9/11 that the West began to appreciate the story of this "soft authoritarian".

Perhaps a purely secular leader would not have achieved the astonishing development of Mahathir's government. Yet, as Mahathir nurtured his Malaysia into the 21st century, Western media institutions and human rights groups obsessed over Malaysia's human rights and corruption issues, viewing the nation entirely through Western lenses. The result was that the outstanding achievement of Mahathir's two decades of leadership was obscured in the miasmic fog of Western assumption.

This miasma repeatedly confuses Americans' understanding of Asia.

Western values emphasise procedure, process and the particular individual. By contrast, modern Asian values, though they are changing, emphasise results, filial loyalty and overall group rights.

People in America may not be permitted to shout "fire" in a movie theatre unless it is under incendiary threat, but individuals have the right to shout fiery imprecations in public. In much of Asia, however, individuals do not have such rights of disruption or overt challenge to the composed societal order.

THE TRIUMPH OF PRAGMATISM OVER IDEOLOGY IN ASIAN GOVERNANCE

While forces of globalisation are gradually diluting differences between the East and the West, these differences remain politically significant. Utilitarianism and pragmatism more than ideological purity have reigned in successful Asian leaders' nations. Lee Kuan Yew, for example, assessed the otherwise-ethically-impeccable Jimmy Carter as the weakest American leader he had ever met. Strong leaders of Asia have their Machiavelli on their night table and operate on the assumption that a multi-party system that defaults at gridlock - instead of boasting day-to-day functionality - is an impediment to superior public policy.

Thus, the test of a government or political system in Asia is not based on whether it is constitutional, politically correct, or ideologically pure, but whether it is successful. Successful governance in Asia begins with economic development, because it paves the way to social stability and political development.

This continuing, grinding process of development proceeds as if steps up the ladder of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Serious leaders, such as Malaysia's Mahathir, are unrelenting in scaling this ladder, while unserious ones usually surface as demagogues, whether competent icons such as Indonesia's mercurial Sukarno

or transparently incompetent ones such as the Philippines' president Joseph Estrada.

A serious one-party system devoted to demonstrating continuous domestic and economic development will attract to it the brightest and most motivated governing talent - rendering the ranks of any would-be opposition pale by comparison and impotent in political reality. Moreover, a tower of Babel cannot speak with one national voice and a fledgling judiciary cannot and should not possess national authority. In essence, too many equally powerful branches of government may produce a tree with no fruit.

Even in terms of regional and international relations, the most successful leaders have been pragmatists, while the least successful leaders have been ideologists. Nehru, who succeeded Gandhi in India, stubbornly stuck with Stalinist central-planning formulas for far too long, and practically made a cult out of the imagined Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. Nehru was a brilliant speaker and passionate Indian but, given his overreliance on ideology, he ultimately failed the test of what makes a great leader.

Similarly, the three dynastic Kims of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are not widely viewed - on the Asian Left or anywhere else on the spectrum - as great leaders. These leaders' unwavering ideology and system of government simply failed the utilitarian test: It did not work to benefit the nation's people.

SUCCESSFUL ASIAN LEADERS' SHARED CHARACTERISTICS

Asia's most successful leaders, defined in Maslovian terms, have spurned rank ideology, whether allegedly "communitarian" as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or Lao People's Democratic Republic, "military authoritarian" as the Republic of the Union

of Myanmar, or "monarchical authoritarian" as the Kingdom of Thailand.

On one level, Asia's successful leaders tend to offer highly stylised leadership, while on another level this leadership is duplicative in its frank public-policy banditry from neighbouring success stories.

Prior to the 2006 military coup, for instance, Thailand's elected prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra often visited Singapore and Kuala Lumpur to acquire transportable policy ideas. Perhaps most famous of all was China's Deng Xiaoping, who listened very carefully to Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, among others, when he set out to resurrect mainland China's moribund economy.

As Asia's national leaders act in an environment that favours pragmatic utilitarianism over ideology, the region's most successful leaders often exhibit a unique set of traits. The common characteristics of successful national leaders who I have studied are not numerous but they are consistently observable.

The first is perhaps the most obvious but also the most necessary to political character: a deeply caring nationalism based not on expansionism or trans-ideology but on pragmatic development within cultural boundaries. Great leaders are quite aware that their greatness depends on the direction and speed of the rail of history on which they are riding; but they do not jump on a train for some ideological Finland Station. Whatever the creepy dimensions of Pol Pot's putative "charisma", his vision for Cambodia was one that required destroying Kampuchea in order to save it - with the consequence that the nation was nearly dissolved into a suburb of Vietnam. That is not leadership, but rather an insane leader.

The second characteristic is obvious as well. The great leader possesses the ability to mass-communicate vision and policy in a way that commands respect and ultimately aims towards consensual agreement. Government by "elite-only" or "force-often" will not suffice. "You must carry the people along with you," the late Lee Kuan Yew once told me. "You cannot do it all by yourself."

Whatever the political system - whether authoritarian, communist or democratic - consent and consensus must, to some significant extent, be earned.

The best current example of this characteristic is "The Lady" Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite living under house arrest for decades, the daughter of the legendary Aung San, Burma's founding father, was widely viewed as the country's future secular "leader-queen". Paradoxically, a departure from pure military authoritarianism via a transitory democratic process will likely produce a kind of new backroom "people's" authoritarianism: rule by "The Lady" herself. But she will be viewed as a success inside the country if broad development follows, even as the West will no doubt be disappointed in other respects such as human rights. Governing in Asia is not meant for parlour intellectuals.

A third character trait might come as a surprise; no matter how big or small the state, the great leader will choose to display an extraordinary attention to details. She or he will often delegate policies and projects to ministers, but not always. I had to chuckle appreciatively when I discovered that one South-east Asian prime minister, sometimes accompanied by his wife, would visit the

site of an iconic construction project as late as midnight, joking with the work crew on the late shift, double checking that only the good cement was being used, and seeing that all was well. This was none other than Mahathir of Malaysia.

Another in South-east Asia wound up knowing more about hydrology - from water reclamation to dyke building - than almost anyone. This was Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew.

Yet another Asian leader understood macro and micro economics - not to mention equity and capital markets - at a level higher than any leader I'd ever interviewed. This was Thaksin Shinawatra of Thailand.

Of course, the big picture is hugely important but, unless little cracks in the window are attended to, the big picture will eventually fracture and the leader will have a mess on his or her hands.

A fourth shared character trait is a "ruthlessness-in-reserve" combined with a sense of superiority that is as embedded in the successful leader as in the otherwise-serenely-domesticated house cat.

True leaders prefer to be both loved and feared, but will choose the latter if only one can be had. It is my prediction that many will be amazed to observe "The Lady" in this Asian context, as her strong-woman style becomes more evident.

Deng Xiaoping exhibited such "ruthlessness-in-reserve" in the substantial ugliness of Tiananmen Square. Yet, during his time in office from 1981 to 1987, Deng engineered a massive mid-course correction of China's economic system that, looking back at it objectively and forgetting Tiananmen for the sake of analysis, was breathtakingly unprecedented, particularly given the generally terrible record of Communist Party rule in most other countries.

Lee Kuan Yew would always declare Deng the greatest leader of the many leaders he met in his half-century at the top tier of Singapore's successful government.

Deng, tough-as-nails strongman though he was, certainly manifested the four common characteristics of Asia's successful leaders as he combined "ruthlessness-in-reserve" with a practical vision for the escape from economic purgatory.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF ASIAN LEADERSHIP FOR REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The greatest leaders in recent decades have prioritised domestic and economic development, and looked at regional and international relations issues in wholly pragmatic terms. A textbook example is the city-state Singapore, which lacks a rural hinterland and found its "agricultural sector" in the foreign fields of Indonesia and Malaysia. Lee Kuan Yew was forced to reach out across national lines in order to make up for the city-state's inherent shortcomings, including size and economic complexity, which presented a strikingly successful example of a non-ideological foreign policy shaped entirely for domestic development. With considerable skill, Singapore's foreign policy still manages to play both sides of the ideological street by, for example, keeping close ties to Washington while honouring the rising Beijing.

With luck and skill, other Asian leaders will follow the Singapore way. Why align against China or against the United States if it is possible to take a positive position towards both? Only in this sense does Nehru's imaginative efforts to chart a policy of ideological non-alignment offer a measure of suggestion today. So long as China and the US do not come to blows and force nations to choose up sides for the larger conflict, a foreign policy of this practical sort will make sense in the 21st century.

It is far easier to imagine than to truly believe that China will surface in the seas of Asia like some friendly whale of Baja Mexico. With centuries of resentment and a stockpile of ambition, it might be wise to anticipate China's emergence as being more similar to Moby Dick's. Yet, the result of China's rise will depend on the quality of Beijing's top leadership more than any one factor, which has remained a persistent pattern throughout Asia since the end of World War II.

Thus, the final leader who has not yet been examined - but may be the most critical for the future regional dynamic - is President Xi Jinping, who appears paramount in China in a way not seen since Deng. Given Xi's goals to purge the party of blatant corruption, keep the economy moving forward and, ultimately, return China to a central position on the world stage, he is arguably Asia's most ambitious leader.

It is absolutely certain that Xi will proceed apace the Asia way: right - a lot more like Lee Kuan Yew than Jimmy Carter.

But what will this mean in terms of China's foreign policy? Unlike the former Soviet Union, no component of Xi's policy will have a recognisable ideological dimension.

From the Chinese perspective, significant international thrusts will be driven by domestic concerns, strategic economic needs and pressures such as energy security.

However, the US will fail to understand Xi's motives, and thus misinterpret China's moves for the worst.

To understand China and its current leader, we must trace back some centuries to see how China collapsed, how much it suffered, and how terribly eager the nation is to replace the US as the leader of the second half of the 21st century. Without America improving its understanding of China, calamity is on the horizon.

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 - **This article is being published in the forthcoming Spring 2016 issue of Georgetown Journal Of Asian Affairs, the journal of the Georgetown University's School of Foreign Affairs.**
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