

**SENIOR MINISTER'S INTERVIEW WITH
NATHAN GARDELS OF GLOBAL VIEWPOINT
ON 26 SEP 95 AT ISTANA**

PART I - US, CHINA/EAST ASIA SECURITY

GV : Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen has said it is time for the United States to stop thinking of itself as "the savior" of Asian security and that US troops ought to leave the region.

How did you view those remarks?

Lee : American-Chinese relations are at a low ebb, and that concerns us all in East Asia. We are anxious over whether the US will remain in the Western Pacific in twenty years because these large differences in rates of growth will result in shifts of economic power and redefine political influence in the region.

It is in everyone's interest to have the US maintain a stable working relationship with China.

Singapore, Thailand, Japan and others have had frictions with the US over the years, but they are trivial compared to that between China and America. Japan can exasperate and even anger the Americans by their multi-fold trade restrictions and their huge

trade surpluses; but Japan cannot threaten and displace America as the supreme power.

China is different. What the Japanese have done, China may be able to do in three or four generations. China is ten times as large as Japan, so it may take several times as long. But when they re-order their society and educate their 1.2 billion people, China may become the number one power on the Western side of the Pacific -- unless America is here as a partner of Japan to balance China. If the triangular relationship US-Japan-China is in balance, the rest of East Asia will be stable.

GV : What is going on in China though? Why this extraordinarily belligerent act of firing missiles into the sea near Taiwan?

Lee : For the big picture -- these dramatic changes in China come from its open door policy that we in Singapore started 35 years ago. It has also happened in Taiwan and Korea. Investors have gone into China with their managers, technicians and engineers; Chinese have studied abroad and returned, local Chinese employees of MNCs have gone abroad for training.

The change in lifestyles and attitudes that come with this process ripples across Chinese society. It is opening up the minds of the people, to other ways of living.

At the same time, the centre has consolidated. The team that Deng put in place after Tiananmen has lasted longer than anyone forecasted in 1989. In the last six months, I believe [Chinese president and party chief] Jiang Zemin has been running the country, independent of Deng and his family, although he has less leeway within the Politburo than Deng had.

This makes for more collegiate decision making. I draw these conclusions from my meetings with Jiang Zemin and Li Peng at the end of August this year.

We talked about Taiwan. I said that if relations with the US continued to be unstable and tensions across the Straits of Taiwan remained high, our project in developing the Suzhou Industrial Zone would not take off. Jiang listened. Li listened. But they said nothing.

I received a response three days later when I met the Vice-Premier in charge of the Suzhou project. After I repeated my concerns, he said, "Taiwan must understand it cannot continue to go down this road [of leveraging the US against the mainland in pursuit of independence], but if it does we cannot rule out the use of force."

In other words, if necessary. Suzhou or other such development projects may have to wait a decade or more. This is a bull point with them. China's unity cannot be subordinated to China's economic development. I took their words seriously because it was not an off-the-cuff comment made in the give and take of conversation, but a considered reply given to me after three days of consultation at the top.

GV : Isn't this belligerent assertion of nationalism at the expense of economic opening a new feature of the post-Deng period?

Lee : Yes and no. You have to look at the longer time-frame, from 1949 when the PRC was founded. Right up to 1978, they were belligerent, intransigent and aggressive. They exported arms to various insurgencies in Southeast Asia. Their media was fierce,

and bellicose. Among other things they berated me as stooge of the colonialists.

That changed in 1980, because of Deng, and for several reasons. The Vietnamese attacked Cambodia in 1978. They needed the support of the ASEAN countries to maintain the pressure on Vietnam to withdraw. Deng visited Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to ask us to stop this Russian attempt to create a Cuba in our backyard.

I reminded Deng that my neighbours, especially Malaysia and Indonesia believed that China, not Russia, was the troublemaker in our region, and that the smaller nations should unite against China, not Russia. This came as a surprise to him.

So he realized that unless they stopped their support for armed communist guerillas in the ASEAN countries, our cooperation in the United Nations and elsewhere would always be constrained.

A year later in 1980, then-premier Zhao Ziyang told me in Beijing that China was stopping all that and I could tell my neighbours.

Six months after this, the financing and the radio propaganda stopped.

Around that time 1978, Deng had begun the opening up of China. The Chinese came to Singapore in droves with camcorders and tape recorders to learn how we ran our economy, even how our hotels were managed. They needed the help of others. They wanted to cooperate and became friendly.

But let us not forget: China is a fierce animal that became friendly, but could be easily agitated and become fierce again.

GV : So, with their new belligerence they are back to their old selves now that they have what they need?

Lee : No. I think this is part of their style in conducting foreign affairs. This present row with the US, I'm convinced, is because the Clinton Administration, without remembering the past, touched a "neuralgic" area -- Taiwan and Tibet. The Chinese have responded ferociously. This is a very dangerous zone to prod. Anything that threatens China's unity is cause for war.

MFN, intellectual property, entry to the WTO -- those are contentious matters for negotiation and compromise between the US and them. Whether you buy or don't buy from them is something to be worked out in a bargain. But if the US interferes with the unity of China, that is a hostile act. They will respond and damn the consequences.

GV : So how can the US and China patch up? How can the present lack of trust be cleared up?

Lee : The US must simply accept that Tibet is part of China, that Taiwan is part of China. It should stop challenging that. If the Dalai Lama is led to believe through five minute photo-opportunities with President Clinton that he can act like Lee Teng-Hui, China will not sit idly by, as they put it.

If Tibet is part of China, then why is the US president seeing this rebel? If the US says Tibet isn't part of China, is the US going to liberate it?

GV : Aside from this spat with the US, the Chinese have been building up their military. Isn't that cause for worry in East Asia?

Lee : The day the Berlin Wall fell, the world began to change to the disadvantage of China. The collapse of the Soviet Union deprived them of their role as a strategic counterbalance. So, they have to build up some leverage in another way such as becoming stronger both economically and militarily.

In this respect, the collapse of the Soviet Union has been a bonus. Russia is a shopper's paradise for military hardware. God knows how many trillions of rubbles, when the exchange rate was not 5000 rubbles to the dollar, went into Soviet R&D and weapons.

Now, the best is there for the picking by the Chinese and others. It is a fire sale, an arms bazaar. To reach the technology level of arms production the Russian's have attained would require a hi-tech economy that will be a long time coming to China.

We can expect to see a qualitative upgrading of many military forces around the world. China would be stupid not to take advantage of this Russian arms bazaar. When will such an opportunity come their way again, to ride on the back of another

country's huge military investments and not have to do the R&D from scratch?

GV : Do you believe the US is trying to "contain" China? Do the Chinese leaders think so?

Lee : No, I don't. This would be a huge change in the US strategy that simply could not take place without a large-scale public debate, like when the "containment" strategy of the Soviet Union was decided back in the 1940's and 50's.

When I said this to the Chinese leaders, they didn't believe me because they don't have a system where foreign policy is made in this way. They do believe the US is trying to contain them.

Perhaps the Chinese ambassador in the US may think as I do.

But he won't stick his neck out and say it, for fear he could be wrong. I can say it to the Chinese leadership because they can't chop off my neck.

GV : After 50 years, haven't the Chinese become convinced that Japan is not a military threat?

Lee : No, not at all. It is probably more psychological than for real. In a discussion with a top Chinese leader after the fall of the Berlin Wall I said that though it would unquestionably be powerful again in twenty or thirty year's time, Russia was for now not much of a threat in the geopolitical picture and America would remain as a stabilizer in the region. China was, of course, not seeking hegemony, though it would grow stronger. So things looked pretty good.

He said, "but you didn't mention Japan." "I haven't forgotten Japan," I said. "I think the Japanese are intelligent enough to realise that they have prospered by cooperating with the Americans and benefitting from their nuclear umbrella, and they would like to continue that for a long time, may be thirty years.

"If the Japanese have their own nuclear weapons, things might be different. But, China has its nuclear weapons, so I don't see how that would matter so much. I can't see the Japanese invading Manchuria at the risk of nuclear war."

He clearly didn't accept this. The brutal, cruel efficiency with which the Japanese, with inferior numbers but superior weaponry, were able to go so deep into China in this century has left a scar as yet unhealed.

The Chinese leaders are fearful of a resurgent Japan.

GV : So, to follow through the logic, not only does China want to build up its arms in fear of Japan, but it also doesn't really want the US to "stop being the savior" of East Asia's security by keeping Japan in check?

Lee : I think the Chinese want the US around at least until they grow strong. Things will all change when their weapons inventory is as complete as the Russians or Americans -- silent subs, deadly accurate, miniaturized multiple nuclear warheads, stealth fighters, etc.

When that day will come, I don't know. Deng Xiao Ping says 50 years. However, I do think the Chinese have learned from the Soviet collapse. They know that they cannot sustain a modern up-to-date military industry until they have a civilian industry and technology to match it. For now, they have to be content

shopping for Russian arms in a thieves' market. But how long will 1990-level military technology, remain advanced?

GV : Isn't all this anxiety about China's build up and the day when the US leaves the region behind the arms race in Southeast Asia? Thailand, Indonesia, even Singapore are buying arms. You've bought a Swedish sub and, reportedly, four more German subs are on order.

Lee : All armed forces want to upgrade. For years I told the Singapore armed forces which wanted submarines "You are crazy. These are shallow waters. You will easily be detected and destroyed with depth charges."

But, well, OK. Here is a Swedish submarine. The economy is doing well and this is cheap sub. Its purchase will still be within the 5% of GDP assigned to defense. So, why not use it for some training. I don't know about the German subs.

As to Chinese power, no one believes we can sock it out with China. In a conventional war, China would walk away without much damage. Only if Japan has nuclear weapons would it make

a difference. Then, what would be the use of all those conventional arms?

GV : What about the British conflict with China in Hong Kong?

Lee : This last minute effort at democracy by the British colonial power is an epilogue of empire. It is a gesture which they know is no more than a gesture. It may be good for politics or for morale in Britain, to feel good. But the British are not putting up a fight. They can't without jeopardizing all that they have built in Hong Kong over a century and which can yield profits for many more years.

PART II

GV : For the first time in 500 years, the West is no longer the formative influence on world affairs. According to the World Bank, China will be the world's largest economy by the year 2020. Is this the Last Western Century?

Lee : Not so fast. I wouldn't put it so apocalyptically. First of all, when we are talking of Asia we are really talking of China.

Asia's influence on the world without China would not be all that much.

Now, China may well become the world's largest economy, but will it become the most admired and the most influential society? Will it have the technology, the standard of living, the quality of life, the lifestyle that others admire and want? Have they got songs, lyrics, films, books and ideas that engage people?

That is going to take time. What will not take a long time is for China, and hence Asia, to say to the West "stop pushing us around."

When Britain was eased out of its position as the world's number one, America took over effortlessly. It was uncomfortable for the British, but the British gave way with grace. Britain needed America's help in two world wars. She paid dearly for that help and had to dismantle her empire. So the American takeover was accompanied with much grace on both sides.

As Harold McMillian put it, the British decided to play the role of Greeks to the Romans, to help America with Britain's experience, just as the Greeks helped the Romans run their empire. Washington was new Rome. Both shared a common language and, a common culture, originally at least.

But for America to be displaced, not in the world but only in the Western Pacific, by an Asian people long despised and dismissed with contempt as decadent, feeble, corrupt and inept, is emotionally very difficult.

That sense of cultural supremacy of Americans will make this adjustment difficult. Americans believe their ideas are universal - the supremacy of individual freedom and the free unfettered expression. But they are not. Never were. In fact, American society was so successful for so long, not because of these ideas and principles, but because of geo-political good fortune, an abundance of resources, immigrant energy, generous inflow of capital and technology from Europe, and two wide oceans that kept the conflicts of the world away from American shores.

It is this sense of cultural supremacy which leads the American media to pick on Singapore and beat us up as authoritarian, dictatorial - an over-ruled, over-restricted, stifling and sterile society.

Why? Because we have not complied with American ideas of how we should govern ourselves.

But we can ill afford to let others experiment with our lives in this small island. These American ideas are principles and theories extracted from the American experience. They have not been successfully transplanted to a non Anglo-Saxon Society like the Philippines although America ruled it for 50 years. And now in America itself after 30 years of experimenting with the Great Society programmes -- there is widespread crime and violence, children kill each other with guns, neighbourhoods are insecure, old people feel forgotten, families are falling apart, and the media attacks the integrity and character of your leaders with impunity, drags down all those in authority and blames everyone but itself.

American principles and theories have not yet proved successful in East Asia, not in Taiwan, Thailand or South Korea. If these countries become better societies than Singapore, in another five or ten years, we will run after them to adopt their practices and to catch up.

GV : Zbigniew Brzezinski has said “what worries me most about America is that our own cultural self-corruption -- our permissive cornucopia -- may undercut America’s capacity not just to sustain its position in the world as a political leader, but eventually even as a systemic model for others.”

Lee : I wouldn’t put it in that colourful way, but he is right. It has already happened. The ideas of individual supremacy and the right to free expression, carried to excesses have not worked. They have made it difficult to keep your society cohesive. Asia can see it is not working....

GV : . extremism in the name of liberty is a vice ...

Lee : ... Those who want a wholesome society safe for individual citizens to exercise their freedom, for young girls and old ladies to walk in the streets at night where the young are not preyed

upon by drug peddlars, will not follow the American model. So, we look around, at the Japanese or the Germans, for a better way of doing things.

But though America is no longer a model for social order, many other parts are obviously worth emulating. The way American companies have responded to competition from the Japanese and bounce back, for example, in manufacturing automobiles through increased productivity. How Americans raise venture capital, take risks and start up new firms. I don't see that in France, Germany or Japan. That is not just creativity of ideas, but the ability to bring the new ideas to fruition and test them in the market place. That is greatly admired around the world.

But this free-for-all, this notion that all ideas should contend and there will be blinding light out of which you'll see the truth -- ha! I haven't seen that in Taiwan, Thailand, Korea or the Philippines.

GV : Isn't that innovative spirit, the capacity for initiative, part and parcel of a society where all individuals are free to create?

Lee : No, it is not. The top 3 to 5 per cent of a society can handle this free-for-all, this clash of ideals. For them, you can afford to turn an egg on its head and ask : “Will this work?”

But if you do this with the mass of the people, in Asia, where over 50% people are not literate, and the other 50% are just barely literate, you’ll have a mess.

The avant-garde may lead a society forward; but if the whole society becomes avant-garde, it will fall apart. Let the avant-garde lead the way, and when they have debugged the system, others can follow.

In this vein, I say, let them have the Internet. How many Singaporeans will be exposed to all these ideas including some crazy ones, which we hope that won’t absorb? Five per cent? OK. That’s intellectual stimulation that can provide the cutting edge for society as a whole.

But to have, day by day, images of violence and raw sex on the picture tube, the whole society exposed to it, will ruin the whole community.

We have to keep in mind that we have many different levels in society.

GV : Isn't that an outmoded view in the information Age? I cite Shimon Peres: "The power of governments were largely due to the monopoly they had over the flow of knowledge. But ever since knowledge has become available to all, a new dynamic has been set in motion and cannot be stopped. Each and every citizen can become his own diplomat, his own administrator, his own governor. The knowledge to do so is available to him. He is no longer inclined to accept directives from on high as self-evident. He judges for himself."

Lee : That is true only to a point. Every lawyer knows the law, but every lawyer at the bar knows who are the better lawyers and who are the best. The more knowledge there is, the more people know who is best qualified to do the job.

In a cabinet meeting, every minister gets the same information. But the ministers who tip the balance in reaching a decision are not the ones who have clever arguments, but those whose

judgements are respected because repeatedly from experience they have been proved right. It is not more information that makes the difference, but better use of information through better judgement. We are not equally gifted or talented, whether doctors, lawyers, engineers, computer systems analysts, whatever. This will still be true in the information society.

GV : I spoke here to the editor of the Business Times of Singapore who, as you know, was taken to court by the government because his paper published leaked information on Singapore's business statistics a day before their scheduled release.

The editor told me he was not bitter and understood why the government took him to court. Lee, he said, wanted to establish a point of principle that the media in Singapore would not be allowed to erode the institutions of authority as has happened in the US since the Pentagon Papers were leaked and published.

Lee : That is right. One of America's great problems is that the authority of its key institutions has been undermined by the media. Maybe Nixon's Vietnam war policy was wrong -- but the publication of the Pentagon Papers undermined the war policy. America was fighting a war! Soldiers were being killed! Why help the enemy? Why undermine the morale and confidence of the fighting men and women?

Ever since then, disgruntled insiders have felt free to leak information on matters high and low, and the press has felt free to publish all sensitive information with impunity. Is it a wonder that there is a problem with the governance of America!

People in government are fearful of having their as yet unformed thoughts leaked out. When they are leaked in the midst of policy making, they look half-baked and the government loses the confidence of its people and of its allies abroad. What would have happened if all of Gen Colin Powell's hesitations and thoughts and his disagreements with Gen Schwartzkov were published in the middle of the build-up for the war against Saddam?

Under American rules today, anything goes. We had to put a stop to that in Singapore before it begins to happen. We said no. We are not going on that path.

GV : The case you brought against the International Herald Tribune for suggesting there was a "pliable judiciary" was also to make a point of principle about media responsibility?

ee : The judiciary is a pillar of society that can't be maligned without proof. If there is corruption, let it be proved. The IHT was irresponsible in publishing the article when their own correspondent in Singapore admitted in a sworn affidavit that the Singapore judiciary is independent. So they lost the case and they had to pay a fine.

In Singapore, as in Britain, if defamatory statements are not true, they are legally actionable. In America, if is not true, so what? It's the freedom of the press. That is to the disadvantage of American leaders. The media has cast this miasma of sleaziness, crookedness and immorality over so many leaders, whether justified or not.

The British haven't gone that far. When, as happened recently, a paper insinuated the John Major was carrying on with a lady, he sued them for libel. They had to apologize. He was right to clear his reputation. He cleared that doubt (though his popularity didn't rise because interest rates are still too high).

GV : America's most prominent futurist said to me "I used to think of Lee Kuan Yew as a man of the future, now I think of him as a man of the past. You can't try to control information flows in this day and age."

Bill Gates has said Singapore wants to have its cake and eat it too. They want to be wired into cyberspace, but keep control over the information that affects their local culture.

But no place is an island anymore, not even Singapore. If you get the Internet, you will get Madonna's lewd lyrics and Bill Safire calling you a dictator.

Are you a man of the past, or a man of the future? Can you have your cake and eat it too?

Lee : I accept two fundamental truths:

First, in an age when technology is changing so fast, if we don't change fast we'll be left behind and become irrelevant. So we have to change - fast.

Second, how you nurture the children of the next generation has not changed, whatever the state of technology. From small tribes, to clans, to nations, the father-mother-son-daughter relationship has not changed. If children lose respect for their elders and disregard the sanctity of the family, the whole society will be imperilled and will disintegrate. There is no substitute for

parental love, no substitute for good neighbourliness, no substitute for authority in those who have to govern.

If the media is always putting down and pulling down the leaders, if they act on the basis that no leader deserves to be taken at face value but must be demolished by impugning his motives and character, and that no one knows better than media pundits, then you will have confusion and eventually disintegration. Their attacks may make good news copy and increase sales, but will make it difficult for the society to work.

Good governance, even today, requires a balance between competing claims by upholding fundamental truths, that there is right and wrong, good and evil, that government must bring good to the largest number of people and not allow lobbies and interest groups to triumph because of superior funding or organisation.

We cannot abandon society to whatever the media or Internet sends our way, good or bad. If everyone gets pornography on a satellite dish the size of a saucer, then the governments of the world have to do something about it, or we will destroy our young and with it human civilisation.

Without maintaining a rational balance between competing interests, no society has a future.

GV : So, in this sense, I suppose, it must be said that you are a man of the future. Those societies where anything goes without balance are the ones in peril of failing.

Lee : You are kind, if that is what you think.

GV : Censorship, then, is the affirmation of community values?

Lee : I would put it slightly stronger. It is community approval, or disapproval. When I was a student in England, I used to read little notices in the newspapers that so and so could not be invited to Buckingham Palace because he had been divorced. Now, they bring women they are having extramarital affairs with to Buckingham Palace.

A barrier has been brushed aside. But such social conventions and sanctions have an important function, to uphold standards in a community. If I want to copulate in my front yard, I cannot be

allowed to say it is my own business. If everyone does it, the children would be brought up confused. So the government and society must say stop it. That is the value of social sanctions -- they are a necessary way of making everyone understand that some kind of behaviour is off limits. They are bad for society.
