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Suggested head: When Might is not Right

by Danny Quah and Irene Ng

A great power is like a crocodile: it can bring danger even as it looks benign. As Singapore's first foreign minister S. Rajaratnam put it, when the crocodile shows its teeth, "one is never quite sure whether it is smiling or baring its teeth."

A statesman who had seen a lot of big teeth in his time, Mr Rajaratnam had no illusions about the brutal nature of great power politics. He accepted great power rivalry as a fact of international life: "Whether we like them or not, we the small nations must learn to cope with the fact of great powers." But he also believed in collective strength, and throughout his career, devoted much energy urging states to act together rather than sit on sidelines, waiting to be picked off one by one.

"If we are internally strong, if we studiously avoid confrontation among ourselves and use such collective strength as we can summon not to confront great powers but to negotiate realistically with them, then we can coexist with the great powers with greater safety and with advantage to ourselves," he said in a 1976 speech. However, when small states negotiate bilaterally with a large one, they only ever negotiate from weakness.

Such reasoning is relevant today more than ever. Small states and middle powers are scrambling to respond to the economic and military coercion emanating from the Trump administration. The list includes abduction of the head of state of a sovereign nation, Venezuela; threats to take over or intervene militarily in Canada, Greenland, Colombia, and Iran; and weaponising tariffs to force political submission and extract territorial concession.

Danger lies now not only in the breakdown of the international rules-based order, but also in how the world reacts. Particularly important for small states is to craft forward-looking, strategic responses that make the best use of their strengths and agilities.

When a large nation plays an aggressive "Might Makes Right, We're a Superpower" strategy against others, three kinds of interested parties emerge. First are those who reckon the Superpower acts on their behalf; second, those who reckon the Superpower acts against them. All else equal, the first group cheers on the aggressor nation's "Might Makes Right" actions.

The second group frets.

For such first and second parties, talk is appropriately about alignment because the situation is a zero-sum game: one side wins only when the other loses. So, choose a side.

The remaining party—third nations—are those not in the direct line of fire. What strategies should they adopt?

Observers might think such third nations should be neutral or non-aligned.

Yet, as on a playground with schoolyard bullies, some third nations will side with the aggressor. This is because they might feel empowered doing so: finally, something they can win at, even if it's some other party taking the hit and the gain. Or they might worry that if they don't stand with the aggressor, they will be the next ones set upon. This doesn't have to be derided as cowardice. It could be just self-serving tactical thinking. Finally, it might be because they figure “Might Makes Right” is the natural way of the world, and the optimal strategy is always to side with whoever is strongest. They point to the law of the jungle and like to quote Thucydides, “the strong do what they can, while the weak suffer what they must”.

We think, however, third nations can do better. They should come together not only to stand for international principles but to call out unacceptable aggression that contravenes international law. They should not just passively align or acquiesce. Instead, they should adapt and mitigate.

To use an analogy, remember how the global climate crisis is bigger than any nation on earth. To manage climate risks, a nation can adapt or mitigate. Adaptation addresses the symptoms of climate change: societies can improve their water management or move their vulnerable populations to safer ground. Mitigation addresses the causes of climate change: societies can transition to green energy, shift out of hydrocarbons into renewables; work to reduce emissions. Similarly, to manage “Might Makes Right” aggression, third nations should develop adaptation and mitigation strategies. An example of adaptation is to seek other ways to prosperity than by attempting to trade with a protectionist great power.

Mitigation strategies include building credibility in international relations, making oneself essential to others and thus altering the cost-benefit calculations for anyone who might have wanted to harm us; seeking out new like-minded partners. By coming together in new coalitions of the willing, the impact of our stance on principles is magnified, a strategy that combines both adaptation and mitigation.

At the Davos World Economic Forum this year, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney warned that the world now stands at “the beginning of a brutal reality” with geopolitically-unrestrained great powers.

At the same time, however, middle powers and small states are not without agency. When we come together in coalitions to solve problems on a case-by-case basis, we can successfully address global challenges. Using such mitigation strategies, we can manage “Might Makes Right” aggression.

Those who think this way do not stand alone. Europe’s coalition of the willing to oppose America’s “We’re a Superpower” strategy continues to grow: French President Emmanuel Macron, for one, called America’s push on Greenland a “new colonialism”. Even UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, despite his traditional British reserve, called out Trump’s actions as “absolutely wrong”.

But while the Transatlantic West has taken its position against America’s “We’re a superpower” approach to foreign relations, some observers in Asia and elsewhere continue to consider that stance naïve.

In their view, “Might Makes Right” has the virtue of direct action, and its effects immediate. The US is unmatched in power and so can and should do whatever it wants. They justify Trump’s actions as only normal for a hegemon. They dismiss negative official statements from other countries as ritualistic and posturing.

Everyone, however, should be able to agree on one intellectual proposition: the historic import of the moment, and the need to read the world as it is – not as it was or should be. Sticking to dogma or old strategic postures can be dangerous, especially in these turbulent times.

As President Tharman Shanmugaratnam argued at Davos, “We have to bend the trajectory”, starting not from idealism alone but from “a plan B that recognises that even as national interests prevail, there’s enough of an intersection between national interests and the global good.” That means building plurilateral alliances around the common challenges faced.

The geopolitical climate in East Asia today is primarily defined by the strategic rivalry between the United States and China. That rivalry influences critical issues such as South China Sea tensions and global trade routes. It places pressures on the smaller countries to choose sides.

This point in history is a crucial moment for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). If it gets its act together, ASEAN can harness its collective strength to shape the regional order and better withstand the pressures of great power rivalry.

This is also a teachable moment for Singaporeans on the intricacies of foreign policy.

Singapore's approach historically has been to develop alliances and partnerships, build a consensus on shared objectives and common interests, and to persuade others to support its position.

It has striven to be nimble in how it responds to great power rivalries, international events and geopolitical challenges. To do this well, it needs to be not only closely attuned to the changing international patterns, but also courageous to shift its own policies and strategies if necessary.

Amidst the flux, one urgent task remains constant for Singapore: managing relationships and building alliances - and doing so while preserving stability and the greatest room for manoeuvre possible. As our founding foreign minister reminds us in a 1974 speech, "so long as we remember that a crocodile is dangerous even when it is friendly, nothing is lost by observing diplomatic niceties."

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*The opinions expressed here are those of the authors. Danny Quah is Li Ka Shing Professor in Economics at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Irene Ng is the authorised biographer of S. Rajaratnam and a former Member of Parliament and journalist.*