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From Third World to First - What's Next? Singapore's Obligations to the Rest of the World From a Human Rights Perspective

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**From Third World to First - What's next?
Singapore's Obligations to the Rest of the World From a Human Rights Perspective**

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Abstract: In the last half a century, Singapore has gone through truly astonishing transformations. It has now arguably come of age as a First World country, as captured by the title of a recent book by the Founding Father of modern Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. But First World countries are normally taken to have substantial obligations towards the less advanced parts of the world. In this respect, what are Singapore's obligations? We will also revisit Singapore's relationship with the human rights movement. [This is the text of speech the author gave in his capacity as NUSS Visiting Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. The speech was given on October 7, 2013 in the Kent Ridge Guild House of the National University of Singapore Society.]

Singapore has come a long way. When Mr Lee Kuan Yew became prime minister, the country had a per capita income of about US\$400. When he stepped down, it was US\$12,000. Today it is a breathtaking US\$61,000, compared to the United State's US\$51,000 or Germany's US40,000. The unique mix of economic freedom and social control that brought about these stunning results makes Singapore a fascinating object of study for social scientists, but also for political philosophers.

The business of political philosophers is to make well-argued proposals for how people should live together. In the Western tradition political philosophy goes back to Plato and Aristotle, in the Eastern to Confucius. Arguments of political philosophers are often idealistic in the sense that they offer visions for the future. Such arguments are not unsound merely because the world is unlikely to become that way very soon. Still,

for philosophy to be relevant, what we propose as worth doing must be in principle doable.

It is as a political philosopher that I am currently in Singapore, to some extent through generous support by NUS. I find much to admire and reflect on here. In this talk I will bring to bear what I think are some important arguments philosophers have made on Singapore's current situation. Some of what I have to say addresses long-standing debates, but the foreign-policy themes in the second half seem underexplored. By the way, Singapore's flag is a standing invitation for philosophers to engage. The stars on the American flag represent the states. But the Singaporean stars represent the sort of thing we study: democracy, peace, progress, justice, equality. So a political philosopher around here is just a person who salutes the flag.

In 2000, Mr Lee published his insightful autobiography *From Third World to First*. I am told the World Bank hands it out to leaders of countries that wish to make that same journey. The book is also an absorbing engagement with critics who think government has no business controlling the media or getting smart men to marry smart women, that generally laws here are too heavy-handed, that Singapore should revise its understanding of "rule of law," as well as with those who have argued that Michael Faye should not have been caned.

It is with the human rights part of this debate that I will engage. The "Asian values debate" ensued in the 1990s. Both Mr Lee and several of his colleagues in government were among the protagonists. Western political thought originated in city-states. Eastern thought originated in imperial structures. Western thought has always

championed oratory, presumably because politics literally originated on the market place. Eastern thought has had little use for oratory, presumably because it is not on market places that empires decide anything. It is curious, then, that a city-state would be the champion of Eastern values. And it is curious that Eastern values would be championed to some extent through the oratory accomplishments of one man. Perhaps this constellation already indicates more underlying unity than met the eye.

The point of contention, in any event, was whether Asian – *East Asian* – societies were different from Western societies in ways that render Western ideas of democracy and human rights inapplicable. Some argued that a society must reach a certain level of development for such ideas to apply. Mr Lee made that argument, stating that “a people must have reached a high level of education and economic development, must have a sizeable middle class, and life must no longer be a fight for basic survival” (p 544) before such ideas could apply. But it was also argued that there were fundamentally different value commitments in East and West. Eastern societies, especially those committed to Confucianism, were said to appreciate order and stability. Western societies were said to emphasize individualism, even at the expense of collective well-being. “Parts of contemporary American society were totally unacceptable to Asians,” writes Mr Lee, “because they represented a breakdown of civil society with guns, drugs, violent crimes, vagrancy and vulgar public behavior” (p 546).

Presumably the point cannot be that Western societies do not value stability. They do, in both practice and philosophical theory. A mainstream approach to the legitimacy of states is *social contract theory*, developed by thinkers such as Thomas

Hobbes, John Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The state is justified because were there no state, individuals would find life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” in Hobbes’s famous words. Stability and order are preconditions for other values to be effective. Both Eastern and Western philosophy has often responded to civil war, and reached that conclusion. The point must be the insistence on differences *in the degree* to which society expects conformity. Western societies are said to expect little by way of conformity even if it brings them down. Eastern societies expect more, and that sustains them.

So we have two arguments against the applicability of human rights to Asian societies: the We-Are-Not-Far-Enough-Along argument, and the We-Are-Different argument. At the end I turn to a third argument that reflects the current position of the government. But for now I proceed with those two. I have always thought the We-Are-Not-Far-Enough-Along argument was more persuasive. After all, both among East Asian societies – indeed among societies with Confucian influence -- and among Western societies we observe a range of political set-ups.

Needless to say, any view about human rights, rule of law and so on must be defended. And surely in implementing but perhaps also in interpreting these ideas there is room for cultural differences. But I doubt anything of significance is tracked by an *East-West* distinction. Europeans and Canadians are more prepared to curb freedom of speech than Americans are. In Germany and Austria Holocaust denial remains illegal. But hardly anybody would say these countries do not respect freedom of speech. Europeans too have often commented on those aspects of American society that Mr Lee

criticizes. But Mr Lee also praises the US for its vibrant civil society, which he believes guarantees its prosperity. The occasional rhetoric of doom and gloom notwithstanding, Mr Lee has probably never believed American society was facing imminent demise. And as far as conformity is concerned, the Germany I grew up in, one Western country, expected more of it than the US in which I now live, another Western country.

And it is also true that communism, nationalism and fascism are ideas that are part of what makes the West the West as much as the idea of human rights is. People died for communist ideals on barricades in Paris long before those ideas reached China. Conversely, India, China and the Philippines were represented on the commission that put together the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Perhaps I take the We-Are-Different argument too literal. Maybe in a politically charged context one should contextualize cultural and philosophical distinctions and presume they are polemically exaggerated. Perhaps the resistance to human rights was resistance to overbearing ideology and lecturing by outsiders. But be that as it may, let us suppose the We-Are-Not-Far-Enough-Along argument was indeed the better argument. As far as that argument is concerned, the title of Mr Lee's book is striking. With justified pride it signals Singapore's arrival in the First World. But then We-Are-Not-Far-Enough-Along argument no longer applies. Let us explore what to make of this point.

It is time to introduce another interlocutor, John Rawls. Professor Rawls, who died in 2002, was arguably the preeminent political philosopher of the 20th century. His main work is *A Theory of Justice*, first published in 1971. Professor Rawls taught at

Harvard, and his book appeared at a time when the Vietnam War had reinvigorated interest in the fundamental questions political philosophers ask. I mention this because it is a curious fact that Mr Lee spent a month at Harvard in 1968 (staying in Eliot House, where decades later I myself would reside for six years). Our campus newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*, described him as “a cool and dapper man whose accent combines his Asian birth and his English education” (Nov. 14, 1968). But he presumably did not prioritize philosophy then. So his circles may not have included my illustrious colleague.

Professor Rawls famously proposed *two principles of justice* for domestic society. At that time he thought these principles would apply to all societies at a certain level of development. In his regard, his approach mirrors the We-Are-Not-Far-Enough-Along argument. The first principle is this: “Each person has the same inalienable claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all.”

This principle captures an idea of the inviolability of personhood. The liberties included are basic civil and political liberties, such as the right to vote and run for office, freedom of speech and assembly, liberty of conscience, freedom of personal property and freedom from arbitrary arrest. People must not merely hold these rights formally. They must have *fair value* for everybody. These rights may conflict, and must then be rendered harmonious. However, in developed societies, Rawls insists, this principle must never be violated, not even for the sake of greater collective welfare.

The second principle is this: “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) attached to offices and positions open to all under

conditions of fair equality of opportunity, and (b) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.” So a just society must also create genuine educational opportunities for all. Finally, a just society accepts economic inequality, but only to the extent necessary to generate the rising tide that lifts all boats.

Two basic evils in American politics register as violations of these principles. One is “money in politics” – the multifarious ways in which the wealthy shape the polity in their image. This is a violation of the first principle because not everybody’s freedoms have fair value in a system with plutocratic leanings. The other is the massive inequality of educational opportunities that arises because schools are funded through municipal taxes. And of course there is no sense in which economic inequality is in the interest of the least-advantaged. The Occupy Movement with its slogan “we are the 99%” has made clear that this situation now matters to Americans.

There is no time for me to offer an extensive defense of these principles. I do, however, offer some considerations in their support while exploring how Singapore relates to these principles. (Otherwise, what would be the point?) As far as Singapore is concerned, one striking deviation is from the first principle. The exercise of some basic liberties envisaged by Rawls is heavily restricted here, among them freedom of the press and freedom of association.

Why *should* those rights be guaranteed, you may ask? They exist to protect against abusive governance. What comes to mind is a remark by Mr George Yeo, former Minister for Foreign Affairs, in his preface to the anthology *The Little Red Dot: Reflections by Singapore’s Diplomats* (ed. by Tommy Koh and Chang Li Lin). That remark

is that joining Singapore's Foreign Service "was like joining Camelot," with its brave knights. Singapore's administration, not merely its splendid foreign service, has as much of a claim to reincarnating Arthur's Camelot as any in the history of public administrations. Who needs protection from such a benevolent and successful government?

Let us help ourselves to a distinction between *input legitimacy* and *output legitimacy*. A government has output legitimacy to the extent that it realizes typical goals of good governance, such as peace and prosperity. A government has input legitimacy to the extent that it came about in the right way. Nowadays this normally means it represents the informed will of its people. Input legitimacy is important not just to make sure the government can speak for the people, but also to make sure that especially a government with much output legitimacy does not become complacent and over-confident in light of past accomplishments.

What is striking about the reference to Camelot is that its knights are renowned for their output legitimacy. But it is the wise king who picks them, not Camelot's populace. Of course, Singapore is not like this. There are elections, and the PAP has won them all. In a speech at the conference "The Big Ideas of Mr Lee Kuan Yew on the Occasion of this 90th Birthday" (Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, September 16, 2013), Mr Janadas Devan has argued that the people's support at the crucial Hong Lim by-elections in 1965 signaled to Malaysia that Singaporeans supported the PAP – support given in full awareness of what was at stake that may well have kept Mr Lee out of prison and altered Singapore's future. Input legitimacy must arise from a continuous process but

this reference might indicate that it has been an essential ingredient of Singapore's story from its inception.

But both kinds of legitimacy come in degrees. A government that properly wins elections has a claim to speak for its people. But its claim is the better the more election results emerge from high-quality political competition and high-quality deliberation among and engagement by the citizens.

My point is conceptual. If somebody claims to speak for a group, we can ask how that could be so, and how come *anybody* can speak on its behalf. Some groups are not constituted to allow for the formation of authentic collective views. The best conditions under which anybody could speak on behalf of a group is if she was not only selected in fair elections from a number of candidates, but if in addition the electorate consists of well-informed citizens who are active participants in political life, rather than passive beneficiaries, and who have opportunities to make up their minds by gathering information from independent sources, and by practicing public deliberation to weigh the pros and cons of what is before them. Public demonstrations are one time-honored way of instigating and advancing deliberation.

You might say I am using a notion of input legitimacy that is bound to find Singapore wanting. Arthur too had input legitimacy: as rightful bearer of Excalibur he *should* have ruled. Perhaps in Singapore input legitimacy could draw on a meritocratic bureaucracy. But that is a difficult argument to make. Once there are elections and the government claims to speak for the people, the will of the people *must* be the basis for input legitimacy, and we must ask what the best way of thinking about that will is.

Otherwise, elections could merely be what Marx once said of religion: opium for the people.

So one way of thinking about Rawls's first principle is by way of creating conditions that maximize input legitimacy. This is also where independence and plurality of the media and freedom of association become important. The best version of plurality and independence of the media does not amount to empowering the unelected rich – think Rupert Murdoch – to build media empires for broadcasting their opinions. I see much plausibility in the point, made by Mr Lee and others, that little is gained by allowing rich individuals to scream out their opinions so that they might speak louder than the democratic government while nobody else gets a word in.

But surely there is middle ground between the state controlling the media and the rich doing so. Perhaps the vibrant and outspoken social media scene in Singapore is a step into the right direction, and international media are of course readily available. I say “perhaps” because the provision of news and informed editorials is greatly helped by a professional staff. Part-time bloggers are much disadvantaged vis-à-vis government-related media. And voices on cyberspace have only limited potential for shaping action if online debates cannot flow over into free and spontaneous political assemblies in the non-virtual world.

Singaporean politics has kept ideas at bay that could undermine its success. Communism, fundamentalism, nationalism and ethnic politics all have been strong in South-East Asia, and have a way of reaching people's minds. But 50 years of success do too. People are often attracted to large-scale ideologies if they seek something bigger

than themselves. If they pursue fulfilling goals in a well-functioning society this happens less. So policies that seemed plausible under the strains that pertained when Singapore became independent may no longer be after Singapore has met with success beyond anybody's dreams. I am thinking here also of the Internal Security Act, the laws protecting the reputation of institutions, or the caning.

Let me add one thought. Nowadays technology makes it possible for people to connect in ways that 30 years ago were only a fantasy. For almost the entirety of history most talents were never discovered because people lacked opportunities even to notice they had them. Most combinations of human possibilities have remained unrealized because people had no way of finding each other. But nowadays no talent and ability need to go undetected. It has been part of the Singapore experience that the market place of ideas can lead to violence. But still, perhaps that next step in Singapore's experiments with social design could be to pioneer the use of technology to bring out the best in people. More political empowerment will only be one part of that. It is a fair guess that in a century in which the economy is increasingly driven by brainpower, investing in an empowered citizenry brings substantial economic benefits.

I have tried to explain how Rawls's first principle is motivated and that substantial advantages could accrue to Singapore by adopting it. Let me briefly address one part of the second principle. That principle takes a critical stance on socio-economic inequalities, insisting they are unjustified unless they lift up all classes of society.

Singapore's wealth is unevenly distributed. More than one in every six households has a disposable wealth of over US\$1 million. On the other hand, in the First

World, Singapore has the highest Gini coefficient, and wages have the lowest share in the GDP. Of course the state has invested in its people also by creating new businesses and especially by providing assistance in home acquisition. Singapore has the highest home ownership rate in the First World. Low-income people are supported in many ways that do not exist elsewhere and are not reflected in the Gini coefficient. At the same time, social policy here seems eager to avoid adverse effects on people's efforts.

Let us see briefly why inequality matters here. Sharing a state means to be expected to comply with its policies, which are policies that shape what kind of a life we can have and what kind of person we can be. Such policies could be devised in numerous ways. Policies are coercively enforced, and this aspect has been pronounced in Singapore. The population went through a profound transformation whose chronicle is an economic fairy tale. It took great leadership, of the one person who came to symbolize the success, but also of others who contributed path-breaking ideas and guidance. However, it also took the compliance and hard work of the population. It took an acceptance of policies that created winners and losers, relatively speaking, although other feasible policies would have created different winners and losers. The higher the expectations a state subjects its citizens to, the more reason there is to resist substantial social and economic inequalities. If following an intensely cooperative and coercively enforced state-building effort some groups have dozens and hundreds of times more than others, those who lose out have good reason to complain.

This argument does, of course, not push all the way towards economic equality. But it does speak against strong inequality. How much inequality is too much? This

question may have no good answer. But a country that displays substantially more inequality than others with a comparable per-capita income should wonder whether all segments of its population get a fair share of the collectively produced pie. But Singapore's real extent of inequality is difficult to assess, as we saw. And as a global city it faces the dual problem of competing for top talent that might leave if better conditions are offered elsewhere and of maintaining decent income levels at the bottom although many others would love to immigrate and do the job for less.

The ongoing preoccupation with inequality in Singapore that has also surfaced in recent speeches by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance I believe reflects the motivation behind Rawls's second principle. So as far as inequality is concerned, Rawls would support a view that is already strong in Singapore, including apparently in the government. One radical proposal that has been made is Lim Chong Yah's "shock therapy," which would temporarily freeze salaries at the top and increase them at the bottom. I have encountered this proposal too recently to have a good view on it. But this is the kind of thing that Rawls's principle supports. Since people around the world are upset about domestic inequalities it may not be outlandish to try to coordinate such measures (at least regarding top earners).

But let us leave the domestic context and move on to the topic of Singapore in the larger context of the global order. My title speaks about "Singapore's obligations to the rest of the world from a human rights perspective." Political philosophers like to talk about moral obligations (which is what is meant here). A country's moral obligation is something that – based on arguments that must be provided – it ought to do, even if it

is not legally required, something it should prioritize in its policy-making and to which it should devote an appropriate share of its revenues.

Unlike most wealthy countries, Singapore cannot have obligations based on its tumultuous past relationship with other parts of the world, as former colonial powers do. Singapore is itself a former colony that started with little and worked its way up. To the extent that Singapore has obligations towards the less advanced it would be because it is wealthy – both in terms of the size of its economy and on a per-capital basis -- and has the *ability* to assist them. It cannot sensibly be the goal of state policy to create an island of bliss and leave the rest behind. The more governmental policy is concerned with domestic relative poverty, the starker the contrast will be between that kind of poverty and global absolute poverty.

Singapore's political and economic presence far outsize what one would expect of a small and young country. Singaporean officials like to emphasize that Singapore is a price-taker in international affairs rather than a price-setter. That might be a prudent thing to say. But it is probably not entirely true any more given Singapore's success, and it has a way of hiding the importance of reflecting on Singapore's obligations to the rest of the world. Singapore has become important to the world: *noblesse oblige*.

With delicate diplomacy Singapore has built its place in the world. While it has made clear that nobody should dare boss it around, Singapore's foreign policy has been based on the principle that it is good for a small country in a vulnerable spot to have as many friends as possible. The country thinks big, and long-term, regionally and globally. It has chaired the UN Security Council, participated in peacekeeping operations, is

known for its environmental policies, invites many foreign students on scholarships and through its Singapore Cooperation Programme shares best practices.

This is impressive. So where would there be space for saying Singapore's obligations are *more demanding*? But once we think about what Singapore's obligations at the international level might be, we must revisit its relationship with human rights.

Of the 22 major human rights treaties, China has ratified eight, Malaysia five, Indonesia 10, Myanmar four and the Philippines 14. Singapore has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, one protocol to that convention, and the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. So Singapore has ratified three. One must wonder: if women and children have human rights, what about the rest of us? Would males lose them upon reaching adulthood? Be that as it may, only the Marshall Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu have signed *fewer* human rights treaties.

Given Singapore's importance to the world, its ratification record is worth pondering. Obviously, a country's ratification record does not allow for immediate inferences as to its actual human rights situation. From a human rights standpoint, one would be *much* better off in Singapore than in many countries with a better ratification record. Nonetheless this low ratification record is problematic.

One way of motivating the idea of human rights is this. Basic and equal respect for human life requires that we make a collective effort to protect individuals from abuse of organized power. Living in a system of states means we are organized in a global regime that captures mutual indifference. This is compatible with basic and equal respect for human life only if we do not leave people entirely to the mercy of the state

where they happen to be born. Human rights fulfill this function: they exist to protect human beings from abuse of organized power. The obligations that come from making good on them accrue globally. Since this is a shared task, those with more of an ability to contribute should contribute more than those with less.

There are ways of developing the idea that human life merits respect that heavily involve Western philosophical or religious baggage. But what I have said so far only draws on respect for human life and the fact that states can be abusive. Confucius and Mencius talked about government being *for the people*. The Confucian tradition emphasizes the significance of relationships. Obligations are the more demanding the more significant the relationship. Family comes first, but there are obligations also to fellow citizens. People in a politically and economically interconnected world also are in a relationship. They are members of the global order. Human rights make a proposal for what obligations apply in that relationship. The relationship between ruler and subject that is one of the five central relationships of Confucianism nowadays must be treated in such a way that the existence and importance of the global order are acknowledged. The “ruler” now is a complex structure with a significant global component.

The idea of human rights has come to play its role in world politics as an intellectual and political response to the major collectivist visions of the last 150 years: fascism, communism, but also ethnocentrism and nationalism. Human rights have assumed their prominence by offering a competing approach to political arrangements Singapore’s founding fathers have so fiercely resisted. Given the major contours of the

intellectual and political struggles that have occurred, the Asian values debate is actually secondary.

You might say even if one accepts that it is a global responsibility to protect individuals from abuse of power and even if human rights offer one way of resisting what Singapore has so successfully resisted, that *still* does not compel you to accept human rights. That is true. But like Singapore, the idea of human rights has come a long way. Even hard-nosed realists should recognize that the idea has become so widely accepted that nowadays it arguably has an impact. Many countries have made human rights goals part of their foreign policy. International civil society is populated by well-funded and outspoken human rights organizations. We have recently witnessed the creation of an entirely new institution, the International Criminal Court, as well as the acceptance, at the UN level, of guiding principles to formulate human rights obligations of businesses.

Like Singapore, the World Bank does not like engaging in human rights talk. It officially thinks of governments as clients whom it does not wish to confront with moral standards. I suspect some people who think of Singapore as one of the world's finest places for business have a similar attitude. But with the increasingly prominent role of human rights also in business this attitude may become obsolete.

Around the world, more and more local concerns are formulated in the language of human rights, a phenomenon known as the vernacularization, or localization, of human rights. Ordinary people increasingly express concerns in terms of human rights rather than a language that earlier might have come more natural to them. They are not

just helping themselves to a legal and political machinery. They also make clear that they are articulating concerns others have in similar ways where they live. There is less of this in China. But the Chinese government, recall, has published White Papers to argue for the supremacy of social and economic rights over civil and political rights, thereby recognizing the significance of human rights discourse.

The human rights language, by making an appeal to our shared species-being *as humans*, has a way of generating sympathy. That is one reason why so many individuals find it is easy to adopt human rights into their understanding of the world. To what extent all this talk about human rights is window-dressing or reality is the subject of much research done by international relations scholars. But clearly this talk bears *much* more on reality now than it did decades ago. Its stock is rising. Even those who just paid lip-service might find that if many people talk the talk, they eventually walk the walk.

In the words of historian Samuel Moyn, human rights have become “the last utopia.” They have replaced utopias like communism and ethnocentrism. The idea of human rights has by far the greatest prospects for rallying people around the globe behind one idea of spelling out what it means to protect human life from abuse of power. This is the kind of area where unity creates better results.

So if you believe that human life is worthy of respect, that protecting it from abuse of power is a global responsibility *and* that it is a good thing if we work together under a unified framework to bring this about, then you now *do* have an argument as to why Singapore should ratify the major human rights treaties. Human rights are the big game in town as far as that kind of protection is concerned. There was something odd

about the timing of the Asian values debate. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed in 1948, but did not matter much until the 70s, and came to full prominence only after the Cold War. It is curious that just when a level of harmony was emerging in global moral discourse a debate ensued that resisted human rights in the name of *harmony*. But if this was peculiar in the 1990s, then certainly now the Confucian eagerness for harmony should sit uneasily with a refusal to support the human rights movement given the increasing prominence of human rights in global governance.

Singapore's pragmatism and long-term thinking should also sit uneasily with being an outlier among First World countries on this important issue. The wisdom of Singapore's founding fathers once adopted English as common language. This was wise because English has become the global medium of commerce and bridge-building. Obvious differences notwithstanding, the same is increasingly true of human rights.

Let me add two supporting considerations in favor of Singapore playing a more active role in the human rights movement. A first point is that a unified moral framework for world politics, or anything that is likely to create more cohesion among people around the world, is much needed. The reason is that we increasingly face challenges that concern our ways of dealing with the planet as such. The dominant global policy challenge of this century is *climate change*. This was not the case when Singapore formulated its principles of foreign policy in the 1960s. It was not even the case when the Asian values debate ensued in the 1990s.

For this century, Singapore faces temperature increases, more haze because of drier conditions in Indonesia, and more severe storms and intensive rainfall than what

there used to be. One of today's *Straits Times* headlines was that the first MRT stations are being equipped with flood barriers in response to the more intense rainfall. Any sea level rise is bad news for a low-lying island. For now Singapore is well-prepared to adapt. But we must think *really* big lest we run into an irreversible ecological disaster. Perhaps this cause is lost, and humanity must prepare itself for a bleak future. There might be many fewer humans then, and they would not live anywhere near the equator. If it can be solved, the problem must be solved at the global level. But much more is needed than what is currently being done.

Again, a unified moral framework, and generally more global cohesion, will plausibly be an important stepping stone towards bringing humanity together and create a proper mind-set to tackle global challenges. Rational self-interest is unlikely to do the work by itself since it will always be rational for any actor to get others to do most of the work. A genuine moral concern for the rest of the world is needed. Does this *require* the acceptance of human rights? Probably not. But again, it is the best prospect we have to bring us together. That counts for a lot in an era where genuinely global problems are increasingly present on political agendas.

Global warming deserves some more exploration when it comes to assessing Singapore's obligations towards the rest of the world. The general problem is that the Third World's sensible desire to make the journey to the First, much as Singapore has done, is hard to square with reducing emissions. At the very least something like a Global Technological Marshall Plan is needed to help countries to make this journey without pushing climate change beyond the point of no return. Those who should

provide assistance (and make changes) are those who pollute a lot, as well as the wealthy. These are two independent criteria. Ability to assist is *one* crucial criterion when it comes to shared problems of global proportions, as the preservation of this planet for future generations is. The point is simple: if a group faces a *joint* problem, those who *can* do more *should* do more. Singapore should therefore assume a share of those responsibilities.

But also as far as contributions to pollution are concerned, Singapore's standing might not be as good as it appears. The country is small and ecologically conscious to some extent. But according to the World Wide Fund for Nature, Singaporeans leave the 12th biggest ecological footprint. If everybody lived this way we would need 3.5 planets Earth to sustain us. In addition, Singapore is heavily involved in petroleum refining, the production of oil drilling equipment (including offshore platform construction), and simply in shipping and trade. Singapore is an important place for the global economy and is thus like as shoemaker for many an ecological footprint, large and small.

As a largely low-lying island that has claimed some 15% of its territory from the sea since 1960, it is also distinctly in Singapore's self-interest to do what it can to slow down climate change. So being a leader on the climate front – in terms of rallying others to the cause and in terms of thinking of technological fixes for mitigation and adaption – would behoove Singapore, on moral and rational grounds, and because of the credibility Singapore as an island close to the equator would instantly have in this context.

This leads me to the second point in support of my lobbying for Singapore's support of the human right regime. That point can also be made by reference to climate

change. Singapore's foreign policy has been geared towards making as many friends as possible. But one way of doing so was by cultivating an attitude of "what does not directly concern us we do not engage with." This attitude may well have been suitable for the world as it was 50 years ago. But it no longer is. In September, during an "Ask the Prime Minister" session on Channel News Asia, Prime Minister Lee stated that Singaporeans are too preoccupied with their own problems and encouraged them to worry more about the rest of the world.

Arguably, the problem the PM noticed is one that comes to haunt the government's very own approach to foreign policy. Again, one advantage of the idea of *human* rights is that it conveys an idea of general *sympathy* with all human beings. That is an idea that human rights education at school can help encourage. Such education could also encourage teenagers to engage with organizations like Amnesty International or Greenpeace. This would direct their attention to the world's problems and the meaningfulness of getting involved with solving them, rather than to the next trip to Orchard Road. (The PM's words of course also provide a reason for making it straightforward for organizations like Greenpeace and Amnesty to be here.)

I said earlier that at the end of I would turn to a third argument as to why human rights standards would not apply to Singapore. The time has come to do so. The UN Human Rights Council is one of the most prominent UN institutions. The Council performs a universal period review of the human rights efforts of all member countries. Singapore was reviewed in July 2011. The process involves the submission of a report by the country, a report by the various UN human rights organs the country is involved in

and by civil society stakeholders, and a presentation to the Council. Members of the Council raise questions and make proposals, and the country publishes a response.

What is striking about Singapore's report is that the government stresses that it is "fully committed to the promotion and protection of human rights." There was no mention of the Asian values debate, or of economic limitations on Singapore's ability to comply. While Singapore was criticized for its low ratification record and issues such as caning, death penalty, Internal Security Act, etc., the response to its record was very positive. The Council realized – and the government emphasized -- that Singapore's human rights compliance is high. There is much "compliance without ratification," by way of contrast with the more common "ratification without compliance." The government also said that it was reviewing ascendancy to various human rights treaties, but not the two treaties that ground the human rights framework, the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights.

So while the government did not present the We-Are-Not-Far-Enough-Along and the We-Are-Different argument, it did present the We-Have-Special-Problems argument. Its core was the familiar insistence on Singapore's priority to maintain a fragile racial and religious harmony. Less explicit in the report but clear nonetheless is that this effort must be made in a region where events in neighboring countries could easily undermine this harmony. The We-Have-Special-Problems argument is more plausible than the other two. I present it at the end because we are now in a position to ask whether in light of these valid concerns anything I have said must be revised.

I do not think so. The government rightly worries about the preservation of hard-won racial and religious stability. But my proposal is that at this stage, Singapore should nonetheless go ahead and ratify the major human rights treaties. A country may accept certain parts of the treaties with reservations, or add interpretations. Such measures could meet the government's concern that it takes the ratification of treaties very seriously and would not ratify if it cannot fully follow through. The considerations in favor of strengthening the human rights regime suggest that it would be more appropriate for Singapore to accept the treaties with some reservations rather than to take its need to confront special problems as a reason not to join. This would not imply that Singapore should start engaging with Malaysia or Indonesia on human rights issues. There is plenty of work to do elsewhere. But ratification, in Confucian terms, would contribute meaningfully to the creation of more, and much needed, global harmony.

Let me conclude. I have emphasized that Singapore's wealth implies that it should take on obligations for shared problems that require a global solution. Climate change is the obvious example. I have folded my discussion of climate change into a discussion of human rights, and this may be controversial. But to repeat, the human rights regime is the biggest game in town for the creation of a unified framework of cooperation. This kind of framework will likely help in the long run when it comes to tackling global problems. So in long run, these issues are deeply connected. One can argue for this connection both in terms of a Confucian adherence to global harmony and in terms of Singaporean long-term pragmatism.

Singapore's intellectual and technology prowess, its creativity and boundless energy is needed for solving any kind of global task. My hope is that Singapore will take on those challenges, and locate its efforts inside of the paradigm that offers the best prospects for formulating a unified moral outlook across the planet – again, all motivated by Singapore's characteristic pragmatism and unsentimental long-term thinking.