

Buy My Beloved Country
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BUY MY BELOVED COUNTRY

Lee Chiu San



*Dedicated to the memory of my classmate,
Sivakant Timari, a true son of Singapore*

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A NEW COLD WAR?

Monday 12 November, 1538 hrs

On board the Nimitz-class, nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Perth, Western Australia

“It looks like my worst fears are coming true,” said the Prime Minister of Australia, Ms Opal Guillame, who was on the bridge with the recently re-elected US President Malcolm Frasier.

“What do you mean?” the President asked.

“The Spratleys are escalating into the next global hot spot,” Ms Guillame reminded him.

“So it would appear,” responded the President. “Nothing much was happening around those rocks in the South China Sea. Then, China and the Philippines had a skirmish over the Scarborough Shoal. But luckily, that all quieted down.”

“Well, things are getting hot again,” Ms Guillame retorted. “We now have confrontations over disputed islands between Japan and Korea as well as Japan and China. Depending on which side you are on, you can refer to the area that the latter two are squabbling over as the Senkaku or Diaoyu Islands.”

“I’m not taking sides,” protested the President. “But if tensions escalate, it will be bad for all of us. And bad for the economy of East Asia as well.”

Seizing upon his concern, Ms Guillame stated, “China is developing into the neighbourhood bully, twice the size of all the other kids, grabbing all the toys and daring anyone to pick a fight with him.

“This new posture of China’s is most disconcerting. The Japanese, normally self-effacing, issued a strongly worded White Paper warning that China’s potentially dangerous maritime activities could trigger unintended consequences. They are concerned over how China might want to conduct future foreign policy.

“Another worry is that though China and Russia have not always been the best of friends, they are now conducting joint naval exercises in the North Pacific. I don’t think the Japanese like it, nor for that matter, do the South Koreans.

“The Chinese are more brazen because they don’t think they will be challenged. They believe that the USA is still preoccupied over the Iranian nuclear threat, Syria, and the unresolved problems of the Arab Spring, which shows no signs of ever becoming a Summer.”

President Frasier kept quiet, and Ms Guillame took the opportunity to continue her pitch.

“They also see your economy struggling, and your debt piling up. The new leaders in China now want to claim what they think is their country’s rightful place on the front bench of world affairs. China believes it is about to succeed the US as the number one world superpower. Therefore, it wants to make its presence felt, especially in East and Southeast Asia.

“They acknowledge the strong US naval presence in the Eastern Pacific, but know that the US has difficulty projecting power in the western reaches, especially in the South China Sea,

which is 8,000 miles away from your mainland. Even Russia, now rich with oil, gas and diamonds, has a weak presence in the Pacific, despite renewed pretensions to superpower status on the part of Putin.”

Ms Guillame was using this opportunity to explore a low-cost solution to her country’s problems. For their security, Australians had always looked towards an Anglo-Saxon global power. In the past, Britain had played this role. But since the British withdrawal East of Suez in 1968, Australia had leaned more and more on the USA.

After the collapse of the Soviet Empire, US primacy had been unchallenged. Australian defence spending had consequently fallen by more than half from its peak in the 1960s.

With the rise of China, all this was changing. China’s appetite for raw materials was happily being satisfied by Australia’s vast mineral resources. But were they feeding a monster that could one day devour them?

She remembered clearly that Ted Hopf, the winner of the 2013 American Political Science Robert Jarvis-Paul Schroder Award, had said that “those who remember the Cold War, and now follow relations between China and the USA, cannot help but feel as if they had seen it all before”.

She recalled that Professor Hopf had warned that if a new Cold War were to come about, China’s surging economic performance would prolong it far longer than the 45 years that it took for the malfunctioning Soviet economy to implode. The Soviets had also managed to antagonise all the neighbouring countries and alienate their so-called affiliated Republics.

While the Chinese had sometimes made themselves unpopular with their neighbours, they had obviously learned

lessons from the Soviet errors. To keep the neighbouring countries from becoming too un-neighbourly and fleeing into the American embrace, the Chinese did serve up carrots while implying that the use of the stick was another option.

Ms Guillame's country could not blithely hope that the Chinese and the American economies would always remain so interdependent and their political relations amicable, thereby allowing Australians to benefit indirectly by keeping their defence costs low. And if relations between the two giants did deteriorate, she would want the one that her country had traditionally leaned on to be in a stronger position.

However, as China's trade was still important, she did not want to be seen moving closer into the American orbit, and thereby being more obligated to accede to their wishes. A boost in defence spending was guaranteed not to endear her to voters at home. The best option was to try to get the Americans to play a larger and more active role.

And, bearing in mind a 2013 article written by Jonathan Eyal, a former Oxford don who was also a political commentator, she wanted to be assured of the permanence of this role. Eyal had said that the clunky diplomacy practised by the US gave the impression that she cared more about accommodating her opponents than listening to her friends.

Though that commentary had been written with reference to the American rapprochement towards Iran, much to the chagrin of Israel and Saudi Arabia, the many flip flops in American foreign policy, especially during the Obama administration, were cause for concern among those who had to adapt to the consequences.

Memories were still fresh over how America had failed key tests in foreign policy. Syrian President Bashir Assad's regime

had walked impudently over American President Obama's 'red line'. And Russian President Vladimir Putin had pointedly disregarded American warnings about the 'cost' of sending forces into Crimea. Russians had occupied that part of Ukraine just days after the two leaders had ended their phone call. America's past hesitancy in pushing back called into question its future ability to influence an increasingly assertive China.

Confident that their conversation was in no danger of being overheard, as the nearest officials were discreetly clustered at the other end of the spacious bridge, Ms Guillame pressed home her point. "Mr President, you know that it will be a reach for the US to project decisive military power into the Western Pacific.

"Your bases in Seoul and Okinawa are merely for defence. Pearl Harbour is too far away. Even Guam, although closer, will have difficulty policing the South China Sea. And how long-term can your plans be in Saipan? It is, after all, an unincorporated Trust Territory.

"Let me mention what Lee Kuan Yew, the first Prime Minister of Singapore, said. He was one of the most astute analysts of politics in this region. In the book to mark his 90th birthday, he said that on the Asian side of the Pacific, you will find it harder to exert influence. Proximity is the key in this case, and China has the advantage of being closer to this region.

"Your being so distant invites China to behave as if this part of the world belongs to them. They believe that it is their domain, theirs to do with as they please."

PM Guillame had obviously given this matter considerable thought. President Frasier, though he was being set up, did not give any indication that he suspected this. He leaned over to PM Guillame and whispered confidentially that his Secretary

of State, Helen Flint, had indeed held several discussions with him on this matter, and that State had even been encouraged to consult several Washington ‘think-tanks’, the Brooklyn Institution being one. Several options were open to the US, the President confided.

PM Guillame paused, partly to plan her next tack, but also to allow the full implication of what she had said earlier to sink in.

Around them, naval vessels flying the US, Australian, New Zealand and Thai flags continued to zig-zag across the ocean in one of the frequent joint naval exercises conducted to test and improve upon these allied navies’ ability to respond to developing threats and to work together.

Playing the role of the sole ‘enemy’ vessel was the nuclear-powered ‘boomer’, the USS Ohio, first in the series of ultra-quiet, deep-diving, and relatively fast submarines capable of launching Trident and Poseidon nuclear-tipped, long-range missiles from its 16 missile tubes. The awesome firepower that a boomer was able to unleash could reduce an entire continent to ashes in a matter of minutes.

The ability of a navy to detect an enemy boomer was therefore essential. This was the ability being tested. Joining the hunt were American Los Angeles Class ‘attack’ submarines, much faster if not quieter, armed with an arsenal of ADCAP torpedoes. British-made Australian Navy submarines were also prowling beneath the waters, seeking out the Ohio. Above the surface, Australian, New Zealand and US helicopters were dropping sonobuoys to ‘ping’ at the Ohio, the sonar operators on board the warships listening intently for any acoustic signature revealing the presence of the silent, stealthy boomer. This task was made more challenging because of the noise created by the

armada of surface ships. It was like trying to locate a spider weaving its net amidst all the chirping and chirruping sounds of the jungle.

Over a much wider area, sub-catcher P3 Orions were flying and similarly dropping sonobuoys in an attempt to ‘corral’, then isolate, the ‘enemy’ submarine. As the giant aircraft carrier, a veritable floating city with over 6,000 crew and aviators, jinked and turned, so did the escort vessels of the carrier group. The seas around them churned and frothed, as if a celestial barrista had poured milky foam on top of an ocean of freshly-brewed cappuccino. At the other end of the bridge, US Defence Secretary Larry Pobreza was observing every move with eagle eyes as he discussed tactics with the American and Australian admirals.

The President stayed thoughtfully silent for a while. Observing him carefully, Ms Guillame saw his brow furrow, and his eyes close for an instant.

She took this as a signal that he was concerned, and would be open to suggestions on how to solve the problem.

“The situation has changed because of China,” she stated. “They used to be quiet. Now, they are beginning to throw their weight around, perhaps to test the US response.”

“It was surprising how vocal they have been,” concurred President Frasier. “And, in recent weeks, belligerent too.”

“China went so far as to issue new passports showing the Spratleys as belonging to them. They also included parts of India, much to the ire of the Indians,” the Australian PM added.

She continued, “They even warned Vietnam to stop exploring for oil around one of those islands. While China can assert itself as a claimant to that area, the Philippines,

Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and Indonesia also have valid claims. The matter should be resolved through proper internationally recognised procedures.

“You can’t just declare unilaterally that those islands belong to China. That’s why I say, the tune has changed. I don’t like it, and I don’t think you do either.”

Her words hit home. Yes, the President had concerns over this issue. But he had relegated the matter to the back burner. There had been other, more pressing issues that he had to face, both internationally and at home, not to mention a hotly contested re-election. He had thought that this boil could be lanced, with further action necessary only after he concluded his second term.

But that festering boil now appeared to be coming to a head. And though he had some general ideas, there was nothing concrete in his mind about how it could be treated.

He paused for a long while, then slowly asked, “You must have something in mind, Madam Prime Minister. Out with it.”

PM Guillame deflected the issue, wishing first to lay a pathway of credible statements upon which her grand proposition would roll in. She started by saying, “The key strategic question for you, and the USA, is how you see your future role in East and Southeast Asia. Are you going to be fly-in, fly-out diplomats and businessmen, with only sporadic and intermittent engagement with this important part of the world? Or do you see yourselves as a resident and permanent member of the region? We all know that China, as it develops and acquires more of an appetite for the good things in life, will continue to be an essential market for the US, Europe and any other country with anything to sell.

“You’ve all been mesmerised by the growth of the Chinese economy, so much so that it has overshadowed – and you have overlooked – another important region, Southeast Asia.”

“No we haven’t,” protested the President, though knowing in his heart that she had caught him out. “If we didn’t think that this region was important, why do you think that I am here, and that all our ships and planes are here today too?”

“That’s precisely my point,” retorted the PM. “You are here today and gone tomorrow.

“Don’t forget what happened during the Obama administration. He talked a lot about America’s ‘new pivot in Asia’. Then he slighted the Asian leaders by cancelling his visits not just once but three times.

“Imagine that! Cancelling highly-anticipated visits three times! You know how much importance Asians put on face. OK, they weren’t happy with the first, and might have forgiven him for the second. The Deepwater Horizon blowout was a national disaster. But the third cancellation was unforgivable. With the Budget impasse and the debt ceiling looming, he gave up the opportunity to address 20 of the assembled leaders at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) meeting and stayed home to firefight in Congress.

“That made Asians, who are much more used to their leaders exercising authority, think that the American President wasn’t in control. It made them worry about the validity of your commitments, and of course, the Chinese made the most of this windfall presented to advance their foreign policy programmes.

“As Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore’s then Prime Minister, and son of Lee Kuan Yew, said, ‘Obviously we prefer a US President who is able to travel and fulfill his international duties to one who is preoccupied with domestic issues.’

“That incident showed two things clearly. The limits of American Presidential power, and where Obama’s priorities lay. The leaders in this region didn’t like to again have their noses rubbed in the fact that they need America more than America needs them.

“Hsien Loong went on to express his concerns about an American President’s ability to maintain his desired direction over a period of time.

“If you want to claw back some credibility, you have to show them that America will be here today, and tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and for all our tomorrows!”

PM Guillame had hit her stride. The subject had been on her mind now for well over a year. She was beginning to relish the opportunity to badger the US President into seeing things her way. She carried on, “Do Americans realise that Southeast Asia has more than 600 million people? That’s as many as there are in Greater Europe.

“The economies of most of the countries here are doing wonderfully well. Indonesia is clocking enviable growth rates. Parts of Thailand, Malaysia and even Indonesia already offer facilities and standards of living that would do credit to First World nations. Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and now Myanmar are opening up to the world. All these countries will acquire middle-class status within a decade.

“When she was Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton wrote that open markets in Asia provide the USA with opportunities for investment, trade and access to new technology.

“Being able to maintain peace and security across the Asia-Pacific is increasingly crucial to global progress.

“Now, not just I, but Mrs Clinton, Lee Kuan Yew and I am

sure others as well, want to see if you are going to translate these intentions into real commitment over the long term. If you do not, you will be leaving all that there is in this lucrative region to the Chinese. Or would you rather be a major player here?”

Unable to think of anything else better to say, President Frasier had to ask, “Is this leading somewhere, Prime Minister?”

“It’s simple, Mr President, if you will forgive me for being so blunt,” she replied, “either you are in, or you are out. Are you going to be Uncle Sam here, in Asia? Or will you be the absent Uncle, preferring to play in desert sands and still looking across the Atlantic pond, expecting your traditional trading partners in Western Europe to provide the impetus to the American economy?”

“With or without the USA, East and Southeast Asia will develop. This region will gallop away while Europe runs out of breath after having to bail out not just Greece and Cyprus, but several other members as well. Do you want to *be* in the game at this poker table? Or will you be content just to make occasional bets from the safety of distance? That would be so small-time! Unbecoming of a world superpower.

“To put it in good American vernacular, haul your ass over here and declare somehow that you *are* and want to *be* an integral part of this region. Lease a base. Buy one. Do whatever you have to. But make sure that you get one. And plant your feet firmly on Asian soil!”

President Frasier realised that she had taken advantage of her sex to harangue him in a way in which no male head of state would have dared to address the leader of the world’s last remaining real superpower. But he also knew that what she had said rang true. He ruefully replied, “Boy, and I thought Maggie

Thatcher was *THE* Iron Lady. You might well be what the Brits need if Argentina calls for a re-match of the Falkland Islands war!”

“I shall take that as a compliment, thank you, Mr President,” smiled the Prime Minister. She followed the smile with a plea. “But in all seriousness, please do something. I implore you. China is our very good customer. They buy our coal, oil, minerals, wool and all the other stuff we produce. But in the longer term, I see an unfettered China as a threat. They can choke us off from our other trading partners.”

“I will certainly bring this matter up with Secretary of State Flint,” promised the President. “She’s in Singapore now, and I’m going to meet her in Bangkok before flying to Yangon and Phnom Penh for the ASEAN¹ meeting. I’m very sure that she will be able to come up with some very good options. Thank you for your insight and candour. You’ve certainly made me see the situation much more clearly.

“But for now, let’s see if they’ve managed to locate that elusive submarine.”

1. Association of Southeast Asia Nations

ASIAN PIVOT?

Tuesday 13 November, 0800 hrs

The Presidential Suite, Oriental Hotel, Bangkok

Breakfast was ready in the dining room of the Presidential Suite. President Frasier had recharged himself after an arduous journey. He had first been lifted by naval helicopter from the USS Carl Vinson to Perth. There, Air Force One had been waiting to take him on the seven-hour flight to Bangkok.

Secretary of State Helen Flint had flown into Bangkok from Singapore. She was, as usual, elegant, in a pale green dress of Thai silk, with a demure Chinese collar hugging her slender neck.

“Had a good flight, Mr President?” she asked.

“Quiet, as all flights should be,” he replied.

“Managed to get some rest?”

“I did,” he answered. “Now, I’m raring to go. Looking forward to meeting His Majesty, the King, and their Lady Prime Minister.”

“Me too,” she said with some enthusiasm. “It looks like we women are on the rise in Asia. There have been women in the top jobs in Australia, Thailand, South Korea, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Philippines. Come on! The West is behind Asia in according equal opportunity to women.”

About The Author

After National Service in 1970, **Lee Chiu San** joined the mass media as a journalist. After stints in advertising and publishing, he found what he described as an honest and satisfying vocation selling cars, which he did from 1986.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, Chiu San was active in motorcycle and car racing, both as an official and as a participant.

In 2007, Chiu San retired from the automotive industry. Since then, he has taken long driving and motorcycle riding tours, volunteered in nature conservation projects, and endeavoured in making ghost-written books.

