

Book Review: Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World

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*Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of modern Singapore and its prime minister from 1959 to 1990, has seem more than fifty years on the world stage. This book gathers key insights from interviews, speeches, and Lee's voluminous published writings, and covers Lee's assessment of China's future, the impact of technology of our economy, and how Singapore successfully opened itself to the world. Of interest for those studying power, life, and culture in any part of the world, finds **Stephen Minas**.*



Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World. Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, Ali Wyne, Henry A. Kissinger. MIT Press. February 2013.

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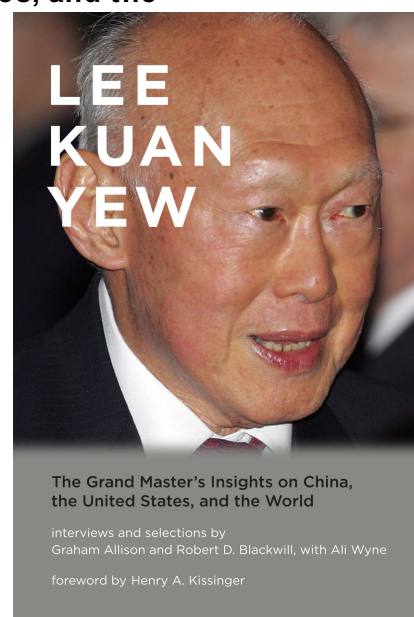
"The 21st century will see Asia recover its place in the world", Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew told a Beijing audience in 1996. It is now widely recognised that the world's [economic centre of gravity is shifting eastward](#), from the mid-Atlantic towards the India-China border. The growing importance of Asia in the global economy has attracted increasing attention from governments, businesses and market participants. There is a [lively online discussion about Asian affairs](#). The publication of books examining China's role and prospects in particular sometimes seems to be following a hockey stick trajectory.

For all that, the contribution of *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* to the debate about Asia's future is unique. For decades, Lee Kuan Yew was an important participant in Asia's economic emergence, becoming Singapore's first prime minister in 1959 and leaving office as 'minister mentor' in his son's cabinet in 2011. During this period, Singapore forged an enduring partnership with the United States and cooperated in the "reform and opening" of China's economy.

The authority of Lee's views comes from the success of Singapore's transformation into a high income country and from the high regard in which Lee has long been held by leaders in the US, China and elsewhere. Henry Kissinger, in his foreword, praises Lee as "an indispensable friend of the United States", while Chinese president Xi Jinping is quoted referring to Lee as "our senior who has our respect".

In this short book, Graham Allison, Robert Blackwill and Ali Wyne organise and present the 89-year-old Lee's perspective on a changing region and on the global political economy more broadly. This perspective been shaped by Lee's decades of dealings with much larger neighbours such as Indonesia, with emerging giants China and India and with the United States.

The book combines interviews with Lee conducted by the editors, along with text from Lee's previous speeches, writings and interviews. The editors' intended audience includes the top tier of official Washington: "We have tried to imagine the questions that the individual who takes the oath of office on January 20, 2013, would find of most immediate interest, and then to summarize Lee's most direct responses in his own words".



The book's editors are well-qualified for this task. Graham Allison is a Harvard University political scientist who has served at senior levels in the US Department of Defense. Allison's 1971 study of the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Essence of Decision*, broke new ground in foreign policy analysis. Robert Blackwill, a Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow, is a former US national security official and ambassador to India.

Most of the material is organised into chapters covering countries (China, the US and India) and issues (US-China relations and democracy are two examples). On China, Lee states that "it is China's intention to be the greatest power in the world". Crucially, Lee argues that China's leaders are pursuing this goal primarily through continuing economic development, having "calculated that they need 30 to 40, maybe 50, years of peace and quiet to catch up". Lee believes that "the Chinese will want to share this century as co-equals with the U.S.". However, Lee warns that "China wants to be China and accepted as such, not as an honorary member of the West".

Lee offers some interesting insights into his dialogues with Chinese policymakers. He cautioned against "peaceful rise", the term for China's foreign relations promoted by theorist Zheng Bijian, warning that "any rise is something that is startling". Lee suggested replacing it with "peaceful renaissance, or evolution, or development". "Peaceful development" is what the official term became. Lee's disclosure that "I once advised a Chinese leader to make English the first language of China" is itself quite startling. This advice is borne of Singapore's experience choosing English as its first language "to open ourselves to the world". Lee acknowledges that it is clearly not realistic to expect China to do likewise.

Lee's emphasis on openness to global talent and ideas is most evident in the chapter on the future of national economic growth. Asked what lessons should be drawn from Singapore's rapid development, Lee states that Singapore adopted the 'American concept' that "whoever joins us is part of us": "You can keep your name, Brzezinski, Berlusconi, whatever it is, you have come, join me, you are American". Lee warns that as technology expands the tradeable sector, this need for openness increases: "As the Internet makes more markets contestable, businesses in Asia must compete on this platform or be swept aside. The national counterpart to businesses that source globally is a society that welcomes foreign talent".

In the chapter on the future of geopolitics and globalization, Lee considers some of the broader implications of this globalised market, which he dates back to March 1991, "when the National Science Foundation privatized the Internet". For example, observing that "this interconnected world is not going to become disconnected", Lee calls for closer integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in order for ASEAN "to remain at the center of East Asia's economic and political evolution".

Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World sets down the thoughts of an 89-year-old veteran of 20th century history with much to say about the future. The book is densely packed with Lee's characteristically blunt assessments of issues, countries and people. The text has been deftly assembled and extensively footnoted. The editors have not offered their own views, letting the former Singaporean leader speak for himself.

Stephen Minas works on international engagement in the State Government of Victoria, Australia. Stephen holds an MSc in International Relations from the LSE, where he studied on a Graduate Merit Award, and Honours degrees in Law and History from the University of Melbourne. The views expressed here are the author's own and not those of the Victorian Government. [Read more reviews by Stephen.](#)