

Offline: The post-American age



ullstein bild/Getty Images



Jeff Greenberg/Getty Images



Richard Horton



Richard Horton

Consider Singapore for a moment. In progress towards the health-related Sustainable Development Goals, Singapore ranks first out of 188 nations (the UK is tenth; the USA, 24th). In measures of the quality of medical care (the Healthcare Access and Quality Index), Singapore ranks 21st (the UK is 30th; the USA, 35th). In this month's world university rankings, produced by the *Times Higher Education*, the National University of Singapore (NUS) was 22nd. NUS is now the leading university in Asia. Singapore, all 241 square miles of it, became a sovereign nation in 1965. Its astonishing success is one of the world's great mysteries. In his new book, *Singapore: Unlikely Power*, historian John Perry tries to unpick the reasons for Singapore's rise. His conclusion? Ambition and anxiety: unrivalled hard work, self-reliance, and optimism combined with an acute sense of the city-state's vulnerability. Perhaps Singapore is an anomaly. Perry writes that, "Before Singapore, no such global city emerged in the tropics. Nor has any since." Whatever the truth, Singapore is now exerting influential soft power in science and health, not only in Asia but also globally. What might we learn from this extraordinary story?

*

Singapore's political and medical scientific leaders are modest about their intentions, but they clearly want their country to be Asia's leading intellectual hub. They are succeeding. The Raffles Dialogue on Human Wellbeing and Security, led by NUS, held its inaugural meeting in 2015. Its overriding conclusion—what Tikki Pang and others called "the great imperative of our times"—was that, "Asian countries need to assume greater leadership of our global village councils." The Raffles Dialogue held its second meeting this month. Its subjects of concern were how to improve human wellbeing, advance access to high-quality evidence and health information, expand the health workforce and health financing, adapt to ageing populations, and optimise regional and global governance in health. The decline of American power and influence was a dominant theme. Who will fill the space vacated by the USA? The answer is likely to be no single nation-state. In Asia, cooperation is the central political motif. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) held its 50th anniversary meeting in the Philippines this year. One conclusion of the Raffles Dialogue was that ASEAN, "can

play a stronger role in regional governance for health". China's President Xi Jinping recently hosted the annual summit of the BRICS plus countries. Bringing together Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, Thailand, Tajikistan, and Guinea, President Xi proclaimed that, "We agree to enhance BRICS role in global health governance, especially in the context of the World Health Organization and UN agencies." As one leading Singaporean diplomat asked last week, "When will western leaders realise the world has changed?" Not yet, it seems.

*

Are there costs to consider in this reimagining of power in global health? Gopal Baratham (1935–2002) was a Singaporean neurosurgeon and novelist. In his book, *A Candle or the Sun*, he investigated the meaning of Singapore for a people seeking to balance their quest for security with their desire for freedom. The book was banned in Singapore when it was first published in 1991. Baratham writes unsparingly of Singapore's "concrete heart". That Singapore's Government existed, "to help get your thoughts in context". That some Singaporeans see only, "false Western values leading to moral decay, unemployment, and social welfare". That, "Singaporeans were denied essential freedoms". And, "The average Singaporean was indeed unhappy and incomplete because his freedom to communicate was severely frustrated." Singapore's culture, "is a matter of security", "on this island paradise of ours trade is a matter of security, education is a matter of security, health is a matter of security, how you wash your underwear is a matter of security". Of course, Singapore has changed considerably during the past quarter century. A visitor no longer feels that sense of claustrophobic state control. At this moment when the world is entering the post-American age, there is much to look forward to as Asian countries assume their rightful place in the democracy of nations. This rebalancing of voice and influence invites us to reflect on the meaning of health, its wider definition and scope, and the idea that wellbeing cannot be measured in only technical biomedical terms. Our individual and collective health also depends on the range of our freedoms.

Richard Horton
richard.horton@lancet.com