

The Fall of The Berlin Wall: A Singaporean Perspective

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In recent history, stretching back twenty years, there are only a few significant events that have changed world history. One of these was the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

In his book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman cited the Fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, as Flattener No. 1 – an event that started a chain reaction that ultimately would lead to the end of the Soviet Empire. The fall of the wall changed history and created long-lasting and wide-spread consequences. Systemic change was one such consequence. This paper specifically presents a Singaporean perspective on the Fall of the Wall.

An important question about walls concerns their impact. Walls have two sides: what are they keeping out or keeping in? The Berlin Wall was built to keep East Germans in and to prevent them from escaping to a better world beyond. It also symbolizes a siege mentality and a physical separation from neighbours. In a different era, the Great Wall of China was meant to keep nomadic barbarians out of Imperial China, but it also had an isolating influence. Societies that welcome foreign ideas and influences, like Tang China and modern Singapore, were and are more dynamic, better able to adapt to change and progress faster as they absorb best practices and good ideas from many sources. When civilizations isolate themselves, they rapidly decline or stagnate: one contemporary example is North Korea. When societies keep their minds open and welcome foreign talents, they flourish: current examples are the US, with its easy acceptance and assimilation of immigrants, and Singapore, with its embrace of foreign talents. While walls are sometimes necessary for protection, it is better to build bridges and dialogues, which convert potential enemies into good friends and helpful neighbours.

SOME SINGAPOREAN PERSPECTIVES:

To my mind one interesting question is what role a re-united Berlin should play now, twenty years after its rebirth. The intervening period was spent on rebuilding and re-connecting the two halves of East and West Berlin. Besides being the capital of re-unified Germany, Berlin should also be more than another one of EU's capitals. Like London and Paris, it should be a global city, but in view of its past history of being a divided city, it should play a special role as a Fusion City, one that bridges divides of ethnicity, religion, language and other differences, a Bastion of Tolerance and Harmony – something that resonates with a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural place like Singapore.

What are the particular traits of Singapore on which the Fall of the Wall had an impact?

Singapore as a global trader: With the end of the Cold War marked by the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent opening up of the ex-Soviet Union itself, economic spaces in the former USSR, Eastern Europe and Central Asian markets became more accessible for Singapore manufacturers and traders, and these economies in turn sought more trade and investments from Singapore. They had some seventy years of repressed demand for both producer and consumer goods and services from the outside world, so there was a rush by other countries to fulfil these new demands.

Singapore as part of globalization: With the advent of the new, ex-Soviet states, at the same time competition for investments also increased, especially from Eastern Europe, which had well-educated and talented peoples. Factories were uprooted as businesses shifted their manufacturing plants into China and other cheaper countries to take advantage of the masses of low-skilled labour. But in a way, the addition of these new economies also increased the size and number of global markets and consumers, just as the rise of China and of India added over 2.5 billion consumers and competitors to the world economy.

Singapore as a small state: The Fall of the Wall liberated small states like the Baltics, which increased the number of like-minded countries which share certain characteristics, such as the economic limitations of small, domestic markets, security vulnerabilities and liability to external political pressures from giant neighbours.

Singapore is just as susceptible to these vulnerabilities and hence is fully sympathetic and supportive of small developing countries. A member of the Non-Aligned Movement, Singapore's resolute opposition to the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia stemmed from its belief in the sovereignty and territorial integrity of small states threatened by irredentist or otherwise hostile neighbours.

Singapore's Own Walls: Every country has its own domestic walls that exist in the minds and demonstrated in the behaviour of its people. Singaporeans, too, have their walls of prejudice against foreign workers and walls of social separation. It will take time and growing self-awareness of our own shortcomings before we become a better, more gracious and more understanding society, hence making it possible for these walls to come down.

Singapore as a Divided City Removed from Its Hinterland: The economic success of Singapore since its independence in 1965 may have obscured the circumstances in which it was ejected from its natural hinterland, Malaya. Hence, in a sense, Singapore is similar to a divided Berlin, which, too, was physically separated from its hinterland or, rather, motherland, West Germany

In a way, the Cold War gave many small states like Singapore a certain amount of certainty and predictability, with the global political and security structures underpinned by two hegemonic super-powers. The advent of an era of hegemony by one super-power meant less room for manoeuvre for small states. As President George W. Bush memorably put it: Either you are with US, or against US in the War on Terror. A more anarchic system is neither suitable nor pleasant for small states since they are liable to predation from rogue states like Saddam's Iraq. Kuwait was lucky that the world's policeman, the US, did respond to its urgent calls for help.

CONCLUSION

The Fall of the Berlin Wall and the peaceful re-unification of Germany offer hope for Asia, where there are still pending cases of divided countries: the two Koreas and China/Taiwan. The first lesson is that the process can occur peacefully, without conflict. Secondly, the process of integration can be smooth even though it might be expensive. Thirdly, the newly-united country can play

a constructive role in the region, as Germany has done within the EU. The dismantling of walls or barriers, be they physical or metaphorical, and the opening up and liberating consequences that brings can only mean good news for a Singapore whose strategic and economic well being depends so much on a stable and peaceful neighbourhood, regional openness, the free flow and exchange of ideas, the creative intermingling of cultural influences and pragmatic coexistence among ethnic and religious communities.

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