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GOVT 5

21 November 2021

Singapore's Realist Approach to International Relations

An Overview of Singapore's Foreign Policy

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore's foreign policy has been underpinned by a realist siege mentality. Political leaders have repeatedly framed the nation as highly vulnerable due to its lack of natural resources, its small size, as well as its geographical location surrounded by much larger - and potentially hostile - states. To overcome these limitations, a core pillar of Singapore's foreign policy approach is maintaining a stable balance of power in Southeast Asia.

At the same time, Singapore seeks to raise the cost of conflict for potential aggressors by deepening interdependence with other states. It positions itself as a "global city", forging diplomatic ties with over 150 countries and establishing 26 free trade agreements to date.¹ Correspondingly, because trade thrives on a stable and orderly global environment, Singapore places much emphasis on having strong international institutions, rule of law, and norms.

As evident, Singapore draws on three key strands of international relations theory - realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism - for its survival. This paper

¹ "Singapore FTAs." *Enterprise Singapore*, n.d., www.enterprisesg.gov.sg/non-financial-assistance/for-singapore-companies/free-trade-agreements/ftas/overview?hl=9.

will analyse specific examples of each school of thought. Ultimately, I seek to show that realism is the dominant strand in Singapore's foreign policy.

Realism: Singapore, Southeast Asia, and the United States

To illustrate Singapore's emphasis on realist theory, we can look at the balance of power in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia has been described as a "naturally multipolar region",² particularly following the end of the Cold War. Mearsheimer suggests that a multipolar system is most prone to conflict because there are more potential conflict dyads, greater likelihood of power imbalance, and greater potential for miscalculation (338). In particular, as the smallest state in the region, Singapore perceives itself as especially vulnerable to political interference or security threats from regional powers. The late Lee Kuan Yew said in 1965: "Our problem is our neighbours are bigger, have very little inducement to leave us alone No tribe in proximity with another tribe is happy until a state of dominance of one over the other is established."³ This clearly reflects a realist mentality, whereby states constantly "anticipate danger and regard each other with suspicion" (Mearsheimer).

However, as a small state, becoming a hegemon is highly unfeasible. Therefore, as a rational actor, Singapore does not seek to maximise power. Rather, it seeks to *maintain* the balance of power in Southeast Asia, primarily through enhancing America's

² Yeo, Andrew. "Asia Policymaker Perspectives: Multipolarity and Great Power Competition in Southeast Asia." *Global Counsel*, 24 Feb 2020, www.global-counsel.com/insights/report/asia-policymaker-perspectives-multipolarity-and-great-power-competition-southeast.

³ Lee, Kuan Yew. "The Future of Malaysia." Institute of International Affairs Conference, 24 Mar 1965, Assembly Hall, Melbourne, Address.

presence in the region. In 2019, Prime Minister Lee and former President Trump renewed a defence pact which allows American forces to use Singapore's air and naval bases.⁴ To ensure that the U.S. has a sustained vested interest in its security, Singapore also maintains strong economic ties, serving as the U.S.' largest trading partner in Southeast Asia.⁵ These policies seek to deter would-be aggressors from attacking Singapore. More significantly, U.S.' involvement in Southeast Asia shifts the system toward a more stable state of unipolarity,⁶ hence minimising potential regional conflict.

Some may argue that Southeast Asia is now in a state of bipolarity given China's rapid growth in power. Regardless, the rationale for why Singapore continues to maintain strong relations with the U.S - for a stable balance of power - still stands. In fact, continued U.S.' presence serves as a counterbalance against China's potential dominance as well. Singapore's persistent efforts to maintain neutrality in the U.S.-China rivalry further reflects its delicate balancing act.

In sum, Singapore's relationship with the U.S. constitutes a form of external balancing, under balance of power theory. According to Wohlforth, the theory posits that "states will check dangerous concentrations of power by building up their own capabilities (internal balancing) or aggregating their capabilities with other states in alliances (external balancing)" (40). Since Singapore faces severe constraints in internal

⁴ Yong, Charissa, and Lim Min Zhang. "PM Lee, Trump Renew Key Defence Pact on US Use of Singapore Air, Naval Bases." *The Straits Times*, 23 Sept 2019, www.straitstimes.com/world/pm-lee-trump-renew-key-defence-pact-on-us-use-of-singapore-air-naval-bases.

⁵ Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. "U.S. Relations With Singapore." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, 1 Oct 2021, www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-singapore/.

⁶ In "The Stability of a Unipolar World", Wohlforth argues that the current state of unipolarity, led by the U.S., is prone to peace.

capability building with its small land area and population, it instead leverages U.S. presence to maintain regional stability.

Liberal Institutionalism: Singapore in ASEAN

Singapore understands, however, that in an international system of anarchy and self-help, it cannot fully depend on the U.S. for security. This is why Singapore has consistently championed greater cooperation and interdependence across Southeast Asian states, through the establishment of institutions, to further minimise the possibility of conflict.

A key example is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Singapore is a founding member. ASEAN helps to facilitate free trade within the region through regional agreements. While the ASEAN Secretariat has no legal authority to enforce compliance, it does have authority to monitor states. This helps to deter cheating through providing information and creating a context for continued bargaining and negotiation.

Given its heavy dependence on trade, Singapore's economy benefits greatly from ASEAN. Indeed, Singapore's continued advocacy in favour of ASEAN indicates a trust in the institution and its functions. In May 2021, Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan reiterated: "To us ASEAN is a cornerstone of our foreign policy."⁷

⁷ Balakrishnan, Vivian. "Southeast Asia in 2021 and the crisis in Myanmar." Asia Society Dialogue, 20 May 2021, Zoom, Opening Remarks.

The benefits are far more than just economic. By establishing deeper interdependence between member states, ASEAN plays a critical role in facilitating peace — no two member states have gone to war in the last 50 years.⁸

In turn, Singapore has actively contributed to ASEAN's development as an institution over the years. For example, as ASEAN Chair in 2018,⁹ Singapore pushed for the establishment of a Smart Cities Network to facilitate cooperation on technology development across ASEAN.¹⁰ Such initiatives hence clearly underscore the state's belief in the importance of institutions. After all, as Keohane and Martin question, if the opposite were true, "what could be the rationale behind devoting resources to structures that will make no difference?" (48)

Constructivism: Singapore as a Norm Entrepreneur

Further, it is important to note that Singapore's active participation in international institutions and agreements is not solely for direct self-interests, but also to promote and *legitimise* these structures.¹¹ Dr Balakrishnan says, "Singapore must support a rules-based global community, promote the rule of international law ... We must stand up on these issues, and speak with conviction, so that people know our position."¹² Correspondingly, Singapore has ratified numerous major international agreements including the Genocide Convention, Montreal Protocol, amongst many others.

⁸ Koh, Tommy. "Why Asean Is Good for Singapore." *The Straits Times*, 9 Jan 2018, cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Why-Asean-is-good-for-Singapore_The-Straits-Times.pdf.

⁹ The Chairmanship of ASEAN rotates annually, in accordance with Article 31 of the ASEAN Charter.

¹⁰ ASEAN Secretariat. "Concept Note: ASEAN Smart Cities Network." ASEAN, Apr 2018, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Concept-Note-of-the-ASEAN-Smart-Cities-Network.pdf>.

¹¹ Here, structures refers to "institutions and shared meanings that make up the context of international action". (Hurd)

¹² Balakrishnan, Vivian. "Diplomacy of Little Red Dot: Past and Present." Ministry of Foreign Affairs Town Hall, 17 July 2017, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, Keynote Address.

This is akin to playing the role of a norm entrepreneur, albeit as a state. The idea is that if more countries like Singapore cooperate in international agreements, then others may feel pressured to do the same because of *social* pressure, ultimately culminating in a more stable global world order — one that benefits Singapore as a small state and trade nation. From this perspective, constructivism does play a significant role in Singapore’s foreign policy.

Realism, Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism: The Order Matters

Yet, in a world dominated by security competition, “necessity will trump any putatively universal morality and ethics” (Wohlforth). Despite its rhetoric about supporting international laws and norms, Singapore has also made contradictory policy choices.

For example, although Singapore signed the Paris Agreement, the Climate Action Tracker has labelled its targets and policies as “critically insufficient” and “not at all consistent with the Paris Agreement”.¹³ Local activists attribute this to the economy’s high dependence on the petrochemical industry.¹⁴ Implementing stronger climate policies could significantly impact Singapore’s economic power, especially since regional states like Vietnam are rivals in fossil fuel production. This suggests that Singapore does pay attention to relative-gains concerns.

Moreover, against international norms of human rights, Singapore is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has taken a firm stance against accepting any

¹³ “Singapore.” *Climate Action Tracker*, 15 Sept 2021, climateactiontracker.org/countries/singapore/.

¹⁴ Gan, Tammy. “Breaking down Singapore’s Climate Scorecard: Greenwatch-Ing the Garden City.” *Green Is The New Black*, 1 Jun 2020, greenisthenewblack.com/greenwatch-climate-scorecard-singapore/.

refugees. This is largely due to fears of overcrowding and domestic backlash, as well as physical security concerns such as crime or even terrorism.

Anchoring bias also has a part to play. The country had an unpleasant experience dealing with Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, when many asylum seekers refused to leave even after the agreed temporary period of 90 days, sparking widespread unrest - protests, hunger strikes and even attempted suicides - in the nation.¹⁵ Following this bitter experience, Singapore announced that refugees would no longer be allowed into the country, implying that the state has formed a negative assessment of refugees ever since.

These two examples illustrate Singapore's realist priorities. As Dr Balakrishnan stressed, Singapore does not "compromise [its] national interests in order to have good relations. The order matters."¹⁶

Conclusion

All in all, Singapore does rely heavily on international institutions and norms to minimise potential for conflict. However, we see that these policies are selective — Singapore only pursues them when they do not conflict with or when they support the state's aim of maintaining the regional balance of power. Case in point: As the most competitive economy in ASEAN,¹⁷ Singapore has considerable power to influence the organisation's decisions in accordance with its own self-interests. Consider that one of ASEAN's aims is to accelerate regional economic growth in the region "in the spirit of

¹⁵ Yuen, Mary. "Vietnamese Refugees and Singapore's Policy." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1990, pp. 81–93., doi.org/10.1163/080382490x00051.

¹⁶ Balakrishnan, Vivian. "Diplomacy of Little Red Dot: Past and Present."

¹⁷ Taylor, Chloe. "Singapore overtakes the US to become world's most competitive country, WEF says." *CNBC*, 8 Oct 2021, www.cnbc.com/2019/10/08/singapore-overtakes-us-to-become-most-competitive-country-wef-says.html.

equality”,¹⁸ yet huge gaps between member states have persisted since its founding in 1967. In fact, the ASEAN Economic Community,¹⁹ first proposed by Singapore, has been accused of increasing inequalities between ASEAN countries.²⁰ Moreover, when it comes to goals like environmental protection and human rights (refugees) that may disadvantage Singapore’s economic or political power, Singapore is much more reluctant to cooperate.

To be sure, realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism are not mutually exclusive; conversely, elements of all three are essential to Singapore’s survival. Nevertheless, it is clear that Singapore’s foreign policies are ultimately built on the survival ideology of a small, vulnerable state in a hostile world. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlights on its website: “As a small state, Singapore has no illusions about the state of our region or the world.”²¹ Therefore, I contend that Singapore’s foreign policy approach is predominantly a realist one.

Word Count: 1598

¹⁸ ASEAN Secretariat. “What We Do.” *ASEAN*, n.d., asean.org/what-we-do#asean-aims.

¹⁹ The ASEAN Economic Community was established in 2015. It seeks to achieve regional economic integration, envisioning ASEAN as a single market.

²⁰ Palatino, Mong. “Who Will Benefit from the ASEAN Economic Community?” *The Diplomat*, 5 May 2015, thediplomat.com/2015/05/who-will-benefit-from-the-asean-economic-community/.

²¹ “Singapore’s Foreign Policy.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore*, n.d., www.mfa.gov.sg/overseas-mission/dubai/about-singapore/foreign-policy.