

# Introduction

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## Rethinking Singapore's Foreign Policy

The conventional understanding of Singapore's foreign policy can be summed up in three main propositions. First, it is dictated by the imperatives of a small state, which Singapore undoubtedly is, at least in a physical sense. Second, and closely following from the above, the primary purpose of Singapore's foreign policy is to ensure its survival. Third, this logic of survival supports a realist understanding of international relations and dictates a *realpolitik* approach to foreign policy and national security. As Michael Leifer, in his widely known book on Singapore's foreign policy, wrote, "Singapore's leaders have consistently approached the matter of foreign policy from the conventional realist perspective of a small state obliged to cope with a world that was potentially hostile and without common government."<sup>1</sup> This implies, among other things, reliance on a strong national defense capability, an emphasis on unilateralism and bilateralism over regionalism and multilateralism, a preference for US military presence to maintain the regional balance of power and a consequent prioritization of international engagement in which defense and strategic relations with external powers assumes salience over regional ties or commitment to regionalism or closer identification with its neighbors.

This collection of essays, written over a period of 13 years (between 1992 and 2005), is intended not as a systematic and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability*, London, Routledge, 2000.

comprehensive record of Singapore's foreign policy. Rather, its purpose is to provide an alternative interpretation and argument about the underpinnings and directions of Singapore's foreign policy.

The main argument of these essays, supported by a selection of documents that highlight the mixed strategies underlying Singapore's foreign policy, is that Singapore's foreign policy approach cannot be understood solely in terms of the above tenets of realism and *realpolitik*. Alternative conceptions of international relations, including liberal institutionalism and social constructivism,<sup>2</sup> offer valuable insights into how the Republic's foreign policy has evolved and must be taken seriously by anyone who wants to investigate how Singapore has not only ensured its survival, but also "punched above its weight", to use a cliché, at the regional and international level.

Realism as a theory of international relations, associated with the work of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, E.H. Carr, Morgenthau and Kissinger, makes the following assumptions:

- (1) states are the main units of international relations and anarchy, defined as the absence of any higher form of authority above the state, is the basic feature of the international system;
- (2) the main goal of states is to ensure their survival and pursue their national interest (both of which may require them to seek greater power relative to their neighbors);
- (3) as a consequence, conflict and war becomes a natural order of things and are almost inevitable;

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<sup>2</sup> An attempt to go beyond realism by invoking interdependence theory is N. Ganesan, *Realism and Interdependence in Singapore's Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2005. For comparative analyses of realism, liberal institutionalism and constructivism as theoretical approaches to the international relations of Southeast Asian states, see: Amitav Acharya, "Realism, Institutionalism and the Asian Economic Crisis", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1–29; Amitav Acharya, "Do Norms and Identity Matter? Community and Power in Southeast Asia's Regional Order", *Pacific Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2005, pp. 95–118; Nikolas Busse, "Constructivism and Southeast Asian Security", *Pacific Review*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1999, pp. 39–60; Sorpong Peou, "Realism and Constructivism in Southeast Asian Security Studies Today", *Pacific Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–20.

- (4) international relations is a zero-sum game in which states are more concerned with their relative gains (“how much you win, how much I win”, rather than win-win solutions);
- (5) international institutions have only a marginal effect in promoting peace and cooperation; and
- (6) the key to international order is balance of power, defined primarily in economic and military terms. By comparison, economic interdependence and international institutions are of little value as mechanisms for maintaining order in international relations; interdependence may actually act as a cause of conflict.

While the foreign policy statements of Singapore’s leaders (especially its founders, as discussed in Chapter 1) suggest a stark realist view of international relations consistent with the above propositions, the country’s actual foreign policy strategy and behavior point to a much more complex picture. To understand these more complex underpinnings of Singapore’s foreign policy, liberal institutionalist and social constructivist understandings of international relations are especially helpful correctives to conventional realist analysis.

Liberal institutionalism holds that international institutions — broadly defined to include regimes and formal organizations — regulate and constrain state preferences by, among other things, developing norms of conduct, facilitating information-sharing, reducing transaction costs and maximizing the payoffs of interdependence. Classical liberalism, associated with Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and Woodrow Wilson, rested on three pillars: commercial liberalism, or the view that economic interdependence, especially free trade, reduces the prospect of war and the utility of force; (2) republican liberalism, or the “democratic peace” argument which assumes that liberal democracies are more peaceful than autocracies or at least seldom fight one another; and (3) the institutionalist argument, which focuses on the contribution of international organizations in managing conflict and promoting cooperation. Some liberals, such as the adherents to what has been called neo-liberal institutionalism, accept international anarchy as a basic feature of

world politics, but challenge realism by arguing in favor of the role of institutions in moderating the condition of anarchy and promoting peace. Those seeking to understand how Singapore's foreign policy has evolved may benefit as much, if not more, by paying attention to the first and third of these liberal mechanisms as by using the realist framework that discounts the pacific effects of both economic interdependence and international institutions.

Another helpful perspective in understanding Singapore's foreign policy is social constructivism, which holds that the national interests and identities of states are not given, but socially constructed through their mutual interactions. International relations are shaped not just by material forces such as military power and wealth, but also by norms, identity-building and common values. International norms such as non-intervention and pacific settlement of disputes, once established, have a life of their own; they create and redefine state interests and approaches. Constructivists take international relations as a social process, rather than as a "strategic interaction". Conditions such as anarchy and power politics are not permanent or "organic" features of international relations. Even under conditions of anarchy (the absence of a higher authority above the state), states lead a social life. International multilateral and regional institutions act as vital mediums for such socialization. Through interaction and socialization, states may develop a "collective identity" that would enable them to overcome power politics and the security dilemma.

The essays in this book offer four main reasons to challenge the conventional realist understanding of Singapore's foreign policy and call for introducing alternative understandings such as those offered by liberal institutionalism and social constructivism.

First, it neglects the strong underpinnings of Singapore's economic and security policy in liberal market economics. In fact, the most famous books on Singapore's foreign policy have paid little attention to the economic underpinnings of its national security. As Chapter 2 of this book (and the speech by Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam entitled "Singapore: Global City", included in the Appendix) demonstrates, Singapore's foreign economic policy and its national security

approach, in the broader sense of the term, is dictated by the liberal framework of globalization rather than the mercantilist notion of self-reliance and autarchy, which would be closer to realism. As a pioneering state which used globalization to its advantage well before the term became popular in international discourse, Singapore also has to allow the liberal underpinnings of the global market economy in devising its foreign policy.

Second, realists vastly overstate the balance of power approach to regional order in Singapore's foreign policy at the expense of the multilateralist and regionalist approach. Singapore's close identification with the US security strategy in the region, based on the belief that the US is the indispensable regional balancer, is a fact. Singapore's policy-makers, despite extoling the beneficial effects of the US military presence, are also acutely aware of the potential and actual costs of security dependence it engenders. They have shunned the status of becoming a formal American ally. As Chapters 3 and 4 show, Singapore is a close ally of the US in the war on terror and a member of the "coalition of the willing" over Iraq. But upon closer reflection, this appears to have been due more to the Bush administration's open hostility to even minor forms of dissent from its preemptive strategy and its strike on Iraq, than to a shared understanding of the sources of terrorism or approaches to combat the menace.

A third argument against the conventional view is that it seriously understates the impact of ASEAN in realizing Singapore's vital foreign policy and security interests, including the preservation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Few accounts of Singapore's foreign policy have seriously wondered how, without the regionalist turn in Indonesia's foreign policy under Suharto, would Singapore have managed its security at a time of British withdrawal from the east of Suez, the US preoccupation in Vietnam and the Nixon Doctrine's stipulation regarding avoiding further direct military intervention in Asia, especially at a time when Singapore's own self-defense forces were too miniscule to provide credible deterrence. Singapore's reliance on ASEAN for ensuring its sovereignty *vis-à-vis* its larger and more powerful neighbors, through the principle of non-intervention and non-use-of-force which ASEAN so strenuously

championed, is much more consistent with the tenets of neo-liberal institutionalism than realism.

Moreover, Singapore's foreign policy-makers have not found it difficult to reconcile their national interests with regional cooperation. Chapter 1 points out how regionalism has increasingly crept into and moderated the initially crude and severe *realpolitik* worldview of Singapore's founding leaders. Chapter 3 shows the variety of ways in which Singapore's leaders, when facing hard times induced by the lingering fallout of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, continued their engagement with existing regional institutions such as ASEAN, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), while at the same time helping to formulate new forms of regionalism and inter-regionalism, including the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (EALAC). Later, Singapore would host the first Asia-Middle East Dialogue. In a similar vein, Chapter 5 discusses how Singapore spoke the need for an ASEAN identity as a way of coping with the simultaneous rise of China and India. The setting for this apparent synthesis between regionalism and *realpolitik* comes from the nature of ASEAN regionalism itself, which at its origin was not intended to replicate West European supranationalism, but to serve as the framework through which member states can pursue their national interests in a manner consistent with the interests of their neighbors. This role of ASEAN was not lost on Singapore's foreign policy-makers, so much so that one of them, former Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng, in his contribution to *The Little Red Dot*, described ASEAN as one of three elements of Singapore's vital interests. This relates to the social constructivist understanding of international relations: interests and identities of states are neither a given nor do they remain constant, but emerge and change through a process of mutual interactions and socialization, and states define their national interest only through a process of mutual interactions. When states begin to see international cooperation and institutions as integral to their vital interests and when they define their national interests by including these institutions, then the resulting dynamic supports a more liberal and social constructivist view of international relations than the realist view.

Fourth, the conventional view also understates the significance of Singapore's role in global multilateral forums and especially in the development of regionalism in Southeast Asia. Belying the standard realist pessimism about the relevance and effectiveness of international institutions, Singapore has produced some of the ablest multilateralists in its diplomatic corps, as evident in Tommy Koh's stewardship of the UN Law of the Sea Conference and the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio. Yet, this apparent paradox is hardly surprising when one considers the essentially liberal globalist underpinnings of Singapore's foreign policy and the irony, not explained in realist analysis, that multilateralism, including the liberal internationalist regimes and institutions developed after World War II, have offered one of the best guarantees of survival for small states in the post-World War II period. They have done so not just through traditional collective security measures, but by institutionalizing and upholding the norms of non-intervention and non-use-of-force. Theories of international relations which ignore the role of norms and ideas are hardpressed to explain why Singapore as a quintessential realist actor has placed so much faith in global multilateralism.

Even more important is Singapore's role in developing ASEAN as a vehicle for intra-mural conflict avoidance, and to engage through ASEAN in what the founding Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam, saw as foreign policy adjustments that would "marry national thinking with regional thinking" and to accept the fact of its "regional existence",<sup>3</sup> precisely the way social constructivism would have put it (i.e., through interaction, states develop a social existence and identity). Throughout the past decades, Singapore has provided new ideas (again a social constructivist mechanism for change and order-building, while realists do not take the role of ideas in international relations seriously) regarding ASEAN cooperation, including AFTA and ASEAN Economic Community. More recently, as

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<sup>3</sup> Statement by S. Rajaratnam, at the Opening Ceremony of the Inaugural Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, August 8, 1967 (included in the Appendix of this book).

discussed in Chapters 3–5, Singapore has taken a great deal of interest in inter-regionalism. It was the originator of the East Asia–Latin America Dialogue as well as the Asia–Middle East Dialogue. If regionalism, as realists would claim, is but a futile exercise for a region marked by tremendous physical, cultural and political diversity, why would Singapore invest so much of its diplomatic time and energy in it?

A word about Singapore's regional environment is in order here. It is often said, from a realist perspective, that Singapore "suffers its region" and needs to "leapfrog" it in order to achieve security and prosperity. This is misleading, to say the least. Compared to small states in many other parts of the world, such as the Middle East and South Asia, Singapore as a small state enjoys one of the most benign regional environments. Since the end of Sukarno's *Konfrontasi*, Singapore has not faced a predatory neighbor. There is no power of India's or China's intimidating size or Iraq's (under the Saddam Hussein regime) and Iran's geopolitical ambition in Singapore's immediate neighborhood. Instead, ASEAN, for all its limitations, has offered Singapore a largely non-coercive neighborhood within which the city-state can pursue its economic development and ensure its national security. Part of the credit for this must go to Singapore's foreign policymakers, who have maintained its engagement in regional institutions. Singapore's ASEAN neighbors, especially Indonesia, have pursued a remarkably positive attitude towards its independence and territorial integrity. Similarly, geography has been a helpful factor, rather than a constraining one, in Singapore's foreign policy and national security. The perils of limited geographic depth has been more than offset by a locational advantage which the country's leaders have exploited fully to make it a hub of international commerce, which in turn has given the major Western powers and Japan (and now India and China as well) a stake in Singapore's security and well-being. In short, realist narratives of Singapore's foreign policy underplay the extent to which the regional environment has been an asset for Singapore's foreign policy.

## Conclusion

Realists often view international cooperation, including participation in international institutions, as a form of “cheap talk” (a game theoretic concept).<sup>4</sup> States may speak the language of cooperation because it makes them look good, but costs little and would have little effect on their actual behavior. It is possible that Singapore’s foreign policymakers might have occasionally engaged in such “cheap talk” about regional cooperation. But realism and power balancing can also be a form of “cheap talk”, a profoundly legitimizing rhetoric, easier to sell to a domestic audience which expects its leaders to be hardnosed defenders of the national interest, and to Great Power friends who do not want their patronage to be wasted on “starry-eyed” rulers of smaller nations. Hence, small states may actually build interdependence and engage in substantial cooperation while speaking the language of hardnosed *realpolitik*.

The conventional view of Singapore’s foreign policy — that it practises an uncompromising approach to regional order in which national defense capabilities and balance of power considerations reign supreme — obscures a more complex picture in which regional interdependence and interactions have held a prominent place. Even when its instincts may be fiercely competitive and zero-sum, cooperation is forced on the city-state by geographic realities and an evolving world order in which “national interest” is deeply enmeshed in regional existence and international interdependence. Contrary to the realist belief that international anarchy (in the sense of having no higher authority above the state) makes competition and rivalry inevitable and cooperation unlikely among states, Singapore’s foreign policy experience demonstrates that anarchy can push states towards socialization and cooperation, and even

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Farrell and Mathew Rabin, “Cheap Talk”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1996, pp. 103–118; Stephen J. Majeski and Shane Fricks, “Conflict and Cooperation in International Relations”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1995, pp. 622–645.

collective identity building. In this regard, Singapore's region has not been a "jungle out there", and its search for regional order is not to be understood as a matter of "Singapore suffering the region". "Leapfrogging" or ignoring the region is enormously costly and is not an option for Singapore. It is rather a matter of Singapore's foreign policymakers navigating through the constraints and opportunities offered by its regional environment, which both shapes and is shaped by its foreign policy.

In sum, understanding and explaining Singapore's foreign policy requires us to go beyond the analytic lens offered by realism or the narratives of survival found in most available literature on the subject. While the realist underpinnings of its foreign policy are important and still relevant, they only offer partial accounts of Singapore's foreign policy. This collection of essays, by extending the line of analysis beyond the "narrative of survival" found in most available accounts of Singapore's foreign policy, will help to bring academic analysis closer to the practice of foreign policy in the island-state.