



Singapore's Diplomatic Dilemma Under US-China Competition

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Abstract. In 2018, with the rise of China and the gradual widening of the trade deficit between China and the United States, the U.S. Trade Representative began imposing tariffs on goods imported from China, as well as setting up other trade barriers, aimed at forcing China to change its "unfair trade practices." So far, the US-China trade war has officially started. Singapore was the strongest security ally of the United States in Asia and the most important economic partner of China in Southeast Asia. Singapore's foreign policy began to fall into a triple diplomatic dilemma (among China, the United States, and the domestic). This paper will be helpful to better understand the diplomatic situation of the middle power countries under the hegemonic competition in the international relations system. And give a deeper understanding to future researchers and policymakers on how to balance regional powers and seek common interests, and promote friendly cooperation and win-win in the international relations system. This paper will use a literature research and case study approach to explore how Singapore can address its own foreign policy dilemma in the international context of the US-China hegemonic competition. Singapore's neutral stance will prevent it from getting involved in the hegemonic competition, maintain a regional balance of power in its foreign policy towards great powers and protect its own national interests well.

Keywords: US-China competition, Singapore, Foreign policy, Dilemma.

1 Introduction

The US-China trade dispute originated with the US President when Donald Trump signed a presidential memorandum on 22nd March 22, 2018, Trump declared that with the rise of China, the trade deficit between China and the US imports and exports, Chinese technology brands such as Huawei, will bring undesirable competition to the US market. China these actions have the potential to affect the US intellectual property rights and technology and business secrets", therefore, the US-China trade war began in the economy, trade, technology, and other aspects of the game [1].

Referring to the logic of neorealism, the behavior of sovereign states is mostly influenced by the structural pressures caused by anarchy. These pressures drive individual sovereign states to strive to gain power in order to protect themselves. At the same

time, sovereign states also encourage the balance of power, because it can promote the stability of the international order [2]. Therefore, the unilateral punitive sanctions imposed by the United States on China are to stabilize the balance of power by suppressing the rise of a country.

Until today, the power game between China and the United States has entered its fifth year. As the competition between China and the United States continues to intensify, China is Singapore's largest international business partner, and the United States is Singapore's second-largest business partner and strongest security ally [3]. With the explosion of US-China competition, Singapore's multilateral foreign policy will become awkward and special. Singapore's foreign policy towards China and the United States began to walk into a triple dilemma [4].

According to the basic principles of realism, states are the main actors in international relations and the power of other institutions or people is limited. As a third party in the US-China competition, Singapore's power and influence are limited. In realism, regardless of the leader's political persuasion, how survival in a competitive environment is the biggest goal of Singapore. US-China competition has evolved into a "dual order" in the Asia-Pacific region [5]. The middle powers are increasingly looking to America for security guarantees and China for economic benefits. However, this "dual order" is further complicated by increasing competition between the two great powers, posing a dilemma for the middle-power countries, including Singapore. Therefore, Singapore needs to adopt certain foreign policy strategies to try to mitigate the negative effects of the structural diplomatic dilemma. And find a foreign policy philosophy that best suits Singapore's national survival and interests.

According to the wisdom of classical realism in international relations theory, Thucydides' logic is that: "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must accept." This is based on an understanding of power and anarchy.

Robert Owen Keohane, conducted in-depth research on the situation of small states and middle power states in the international relations system as early as 1969, and published his book "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: The small States in International Politics". Owen Keohane writes in his book said: Small and middle power states (like Singapore) are considered "price takers" for great power politics, because their underlying distribution of power exposes their vulnerability to system-wide power, limiting their independent influence capacity for structural change. This internal and external situation is deeply reflected in Singapore's current international situation [6].

With regard to Singapore's existing foreign policy, which mostly proceeds from neo-realism. For example, Among the research books on Singapore's foreign policy, there had one monograph titled "Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability". In this book, the author, Michael, highlights that although Singapore has become a leading economic power in Southeast Asia. This economic power provides the resources for the nation's excellent defense capabilities. However, despite its success, Singapore's foreign policy remains deeply entrenched in its own vulnerabilities. Beginning with the first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, Singaporean politicians have been concerned about the domestic and international vulnerabilities that may arise from Singapore's limited land resources, ethnic tensions, and special geographical

location. In order to deal with its own vulnerability, Singapore's main approach has always been multilateral diplomacy [7].

In 2018 Ralf Emmers's research paper "The Role of Middle Powers in Asian Multilateralism", he stressed that middle power countries like Singapore can promote and maintain the rules and norms in the international relations system through multilateralism and strive to participate in the activities of international organizations to create a good regional governance system, thus promoting their own interests. In addition, Singapore also can use the multilateral environment to perfect the "power deficit" between great and non-great powers [8]. These strategies enable it to play a role "beyond its own strength" in the international system.

Through the above literature review, it can be clearly found that most of the existing literature is based on neorealism. Nevertheless, according to the characteristics of the foreign policy in Singapore - multilateralism - the study of Singapore's foreign policy also needs to be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives and case studies in order to gain a more comprehensive and correct understanding of Singapore's current foreign dilemma.

2 Case Study

Case study research is an empirical approach to the social sciences. The case study aspect emphasizes the case study design and case selection strategies such as, on the other hand, the history, context and rich facts of the case study.

2.1 Dilemma in US-Singapore Relations

Singapore and the United States have formed formal and friendly diplomatic relations since 1836 when the United States first established a consulate in Singapore [9].

Since then, the United States and Singapore have worked as close partners based on shared economic interests, national security and defense cooperation, and enduring people communication ties.

On May 12, 2022, the United States invited ASEAN member states to participate in a special U.S.-ASEAN summit at the White House. From the theme of the summit, the summit can be seen as an important step in the implementation of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy [10]. Singapore, as a member of ASEAN, also expressed its views on the Indo-Pacific Strategy at the summit. Singapore stated that the United States' excessive concern about the rise of China may restart the Cold War in the new century which may divide the international community.

Singapore wants its foreign policy to be based on the common interests of the Southeast Asian region, rather than focusing on America's strategic interests in reshaping China's surrounding environment.

Since the system of international relations is anarchic, there is no higher power in the international relations system that can influence the foreign policy of other countries. The Cold War mentality will only undermine the global peace framework, and if

Singapore chooses to join the US in confronting the rise of China, it will only exacerbate the security challenges of the 21st century.

Therefore, in the US-China competition, a neutral attitude will be the best choice for Singapore's foreign policy, which can safeguard its own interests, rather than taking sides regardless of issues and backgrounds [11].

It is evident from the appeal case that Singapore and the United States have long had a strong cooperative relationship in defense, business and political economy. However, in formulating its foreign policy, Singapore has always maintained a neutral and independent stance. As the most solid ally of the United States in ASEAN, Singapore's foreign policy of refusing to choose sides may cause dissatisfaction in the United States, which may affect the economic and security cooperation between the two countries.

According to the wisdom of realism, Singapore, as a country with limited resources, needs to make choices and struggle for its own survival, such as cooperating with the great power of the United States, and striving to become a lubricant for the competition between the two countries. But at the same time, as a neutral and independent sovereign state, Singapore has been trying to avoid taking sides.

According to Morgenthau's theory of realism, the most effective way to manage power is to balance it. Singapore As a middle power country, although its influence in international competition is limited, However, Singapore as the strongest ally of the United States in Southeast Asia. By encouraging countries to work together to maintain order in Asia, Singapore can work together to achieve a regional win-win situation rather than a competition. For example, sovereign countries can work together to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and jointly develop a vaccine to help the world economy and people's daily life return to normal as soon as possible.

2.2 Dilemma in China-Singapore Relations

Since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and Singapore in the last century, the two countries have maintained long-term and substantive diplomatic relations, but at the same time, the diplomatic relationship between China and Singapore is not only a simple international relationship between a great power country and a middle power country, but also involves a game of ideology and politics behind its foreign policy. For a long time, China-Singapore diplomatic relation is a special and complex international relation.

Although Singapore is the only predominantly Chinese member of ASEAN and is by far its most economically developed and politically influential country in the region, it has always balanced its diplomatic relations with China from a realistic perspective. Whether it is the U.S.-China technology and trade war or the South China Sea problem, Singapore has always maintained a cautious and neutral approach to the rise of China and has always tried to avoid getting involved in any great power rivalry or international conflict.

Given that 74 percent of Singapore's population is Chinese, Singapore's foreign policy stance tends to confuse many Chinese citizens and even the Chinese government (see Figure 1) [12].

(in 1,000s)

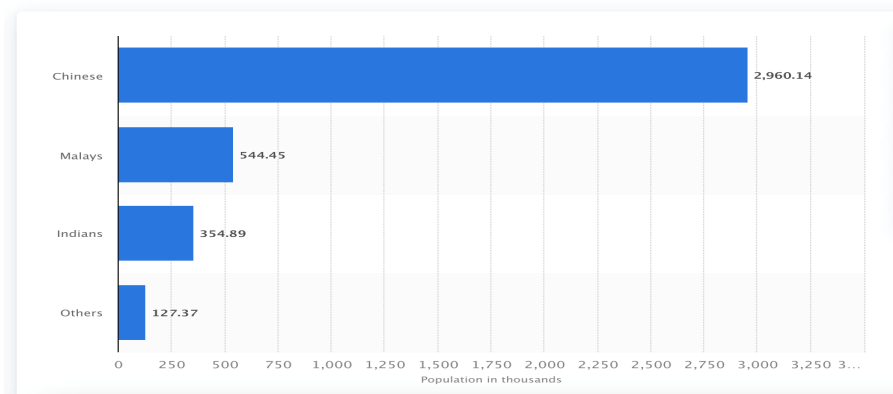


Fig. 1. The number of different ethnic groups in the resident population of Singapore in 2022 (From Statista.com)

This view comes from a sense of Chinese nationalism that relies primarily on associating race with political allegiance to China. However, as an independent sovereign state, Singapore and its Chinese citizens do not and should not have the same sense of nationalism as China. This clash of perceptions and consciousness may indirectly have a negative impact on the foreign politics of both countries [13].

From the analysis of above Singapore's foreign policy towards China, it was obvious to find that, although Singapore and China have a great connection in geography and culture, there are still many differences in political concepts, diplomatic concepts, and democratic ideas.

Assuming that every country is a rational actor, they will choose a plan whose benefits outweigh the risks. For a realist, the highest development goal of Singapore is the survival of the country. Rather than engage in the dilemma of U.S.-China competition or choosing sides in favor of China.

Because the international society is in a state of anarchy, no country can become a hegemony and rule the whole world. As a middle power country, Singapore can survive best only by participating in international organisations such as the United Nations, maintaining a neutral attitude, exerting its international influence and positively promoting the balance of great powers (the United States and China).

2.3 Dilemma in Singapore Domestic Foreign Policy Making

Singapore has long been concerned about the country's fragility due to its limited territorial resources, domestic multi-ethnic tensions and its particular geographic location (next to Malaysia and Indonesia).

To deal with its own vulnerabilities, Singapore's main approach is to conduct diplomacy on the basis of a balance of regional power.

Referring to the logic of classical realism, Thucydides once said: "The strong will try their best to obtain the greatest benefits, and the weak can only bear the fragility

brought about by the limitation of power and interests". All these results are due to the anarchy of the international relations system. Therefore, small states with "limited power" are considered to be the "price takers" of great power politics. Singapore's foreign policy has long been shaped by its own vulnerabilities. To avoid this dilemma in foreign policy making, Singapore's foreign policy should strive to develop the interests of the nation's multilateralism, protect the nation's limited power and interests, and expand the nation's interests, power and influence.

Singapore's foreign policy making is not only influenced by regional great powers, but also by other ASEAN member states based on its special geographical location and national history (Singapore was once part of Malaysia). In the meantime, as the most economically and politically influential member of ASEAN, Singapore's foreign policy also represents the diplomatic positions of ASEAN organization. Singapore needs to consider both its own foreign policy interests and those of other ASEAN members.

For example, if Singapore's foreign policy favours the United States too much, it may affect the foreign policy of other ASEAN countries with close diplomatic relations with China, such as Laos, thereby affecting the discord among ASEAN's diplomatic opinions.

Therefore, Singapore can only safeguard its foreign policy interests by maintaining an independent and neutral diplomatic stance.

3 Implications for Singapore's foreign policy

Through a Neorealist hierarchical research approach, US-China competition has had a number of negative effects on global politics and economics as US-China competition has intensified and global economic integration has deepened. As an important participant in globalisation, Singapore's foreign policy needs to be improved and updated according to the current international situation. The specific Singapore foreign policy recommendations are as follows:

3.1 Singapore's Foreign Policy Intentions

The deepening of the U.S.-China trade war will bring adverse development impacts on Singapore, an important participant in global economic integration. Singapore can maintain a neutral diplomatic philosophy while working to build bridges for the United States and China, and try to expand Singapore's international influence on bilateral relations between these two countries. Enhancing Singapore's reputation, influence and position in the international relations system.

3.2 Singapore's Foreign Policy Toward the United States

With hegemonic competition, the consistently neutral sovereign Singapore is likely to face the dilemma of choosing sides, Singapore as a multilateral realism adherent, its biggest target is only the country's survival, Singapore is not willing to choose sides,

destroy the economic cooperation with China, or lose the security ally of the United States. Therefore, in Singapore's foreign policy toward the United States, Singapore can adhere to the diplomatic concept of multilateralism, adhere to the diplomatic principle of neutrality, and not be involved in any hegemonic competition and conflict.

3.3 Singapore's Foreign Policy Toward China

On June 12, 2022, Singapore hosted the Shangri-La Dialogue, a major security conference in the Asia-Pacific region that focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and U.S.-China tensions. One positive outcome of the Singapore Shangri-La Dialogue was that the United States and Chinese officials agreed to continue to discuss military exchanges and cooperation through military and diplomatic channels [14]. This indirectly demonstrates the positive role that Singapore can play as a third country in balancing great power competition. In Singapore's foreign policy towards China, Singapore can continue to encourage good dialogue and cooperation among competing sovereign states, thereby promoting cohesion within the system of international relations.

4 Conclusion

In the contrast of state power, since China and the United States are great power states, Singapore is a middle power state, Singapore is in an awkward diplomatic position in the US-China rivalry. Not only does Singapore need to balance its international relations with the US and China, but it also needs to consider the views of other ASEAN members on its foreign policy.

As a "lubricant" and a bridge of communication in the competition of great power countries, Singapore never wants to take sides. According to the wisdom of multilateralism, The United States, China and Singapore can try to jointly choose a development path that is consistent with their respective national interests and powers, and work together to achieve a triple-win outcome. Singapore's foreign policy has always adhered to the characteristics of multilateralism, maintaining a neutral attitude while maintaining friendly and cooperative relations with many parties, striving not to get involved in any hegemonic competition and conflict, and even expanding its influence in international relations by promoting friendly dialogue among great powers.

Singapore has enhanced its diplomatic role by continuously contributing to the balance of regional power structures among the major powers and has increased its influence through its membership in international organizations such as UN, ASEAN, and WTO. Thus, it can safeguard its national interests and international viability. Singapore's cultivation of great power interests and the equalization of regional hegemonic power will also effectively serve as a deterrent to regional power interference. This will provide Singapore with a solid foundation for its long-standing neutrality and broaden its freedom of foreign policy-making, as well as facilitate the expansion of Singapore's diplomatic influence.

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