

Singapore’s Flexible Policy In Relations with The United States (1990-2012)

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Abstract:

Singapore had always tried to pursue a consistent policy with the United States, affirming that the strong United State presence “was vital to the stability and prosper of Asia”, and at the same time, Singapore was very proactive in profoundly upgrading the strategic bilateral relations in all aspects. In a number of issues, however, Singapore implemented a highly independent and autonomous policy, asserting its own perspectives upon the American-style democracy, extremist Islam in the war against terrorism, and particularly refusing to become a “Major Non-NATO Ally” of the United States (U.S.)— favoring instead to be a “Major Security Partner”, further than a friend yet not an ally, in the Singapore-U.S. relations. In foreign decisions pertaining to the United States, Singapore’s neutral, non-aligned foreign policy with China as an impact factor was maintained with the ultimate objective of protecting the national interests and the survival of this small island nation.

Keywords: flexible, policy, relations, Singapore, the United States (U.S.)



Introduction:

Ultimately each nation's foreign policy has three basic objectives: security, growth and promotion of impact worldwide. Singapore in its bilateral relation with the United States (U.S.) had pursued a "flexible and pragmatic" foreign policy, in line with regional and international changes. The U.S. had seen Singapore as a strategic partner in Southeast Asia—a critical region—for the sake of hegemony and military deployments, while Singapore needed a powerhouse capable of supporting it—a small island nation—to protect the country, accelerate the industrialization process, develop the economy thereby enhance Singapore's position in the region.

Singapore has many limits in terms of size, population, and natural resources; however, its geo-economically and geo-politically critical location in Southeast Asia had always made Singapore a strategic focus of the major powers. Aware of its own pros and cons, Singapore had unflinchingly presented itself as a helpful partner who played an essential and timely role in the U.S. military deployments in Southeast Asia. Singapore had implemented a consistent policy with the United States, asserting that the United States "plays a vital role in the stability and prosperity of Asia" [14, p.50]. Despite its so-called pragmatic policy in relations with the United States, Singapore managed to defend its national views on several issues discussed between the two countries, and the Singaporean government had made a number of independent and autonomous decisions. It can be observed that Singapore had a very specific national development strategy first and foremost based on its national interests and its people. All policies, strategies and actions were for the ultimate purpose of ensuring the survival of the island as an independent and sovereign nation. As a result, Singapore had obtained a miraculous takeoff, rising to stand among the developed countries. This was a typical example from which Vietnam could learn how to make its foreign policy in the current process of extensive international integration.

Singapore's independence and autonomy in relations with the United States regarding the issues of human rights and democracy:

In February 1995, the U.S. government announced the "intervention and expansion strategy" with an overall aim of promoting all aspects of the American power, keeping its world leadership going on in order to establish Pax - Americana—American-style peace, and making American values widely known to the world.

This revealed that security and defence were no longer the only strategic priority in Southeast Asia and that human rights and democracy had become the leading concern of the U.S. government. When its strategic priorities changed, the U.S. pressured other countries, including its allies and close partners, into political reform and the application of liberal democracy with respect for human rights according to European-American standards. The U.S. and Western nations also attached democratic reform to foreign aids in the recipient countries.

Meanwhile several U.S. human rights organizations criticized Singapore for its selective media censorship and strict enforcement of the Domestic Security Act. According to U.S. Ambassador David Adelman, although elections were free and fair in Singapore, the Singaporeans were entitled to an open political system with more opposing views [2]. It was claimed in the U.S. State Department's 2012 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices that the People's Action Party (PAP) in Singapore had maintained its political dominance by imposing restraints on the political election activities of its opposition parties [5, p.4]. Political graffiti activities, such as symbolic paintings, slogans, banners, or posters, were prohibited under the Vandalism Act [10, p.7]. Singapore also ranked 149/179 in the 2013 World Press Freedom Index [4, p.51].

Among its allies and close partners, Singapore and Malaysia were the first two countries to resist the U.S. pressure in terms of democracy and human rights. It was pointed out by Lee Kuan Yew that the Confucian teachings in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam clashed with the Western values of social order and individual rights. He analyzed that the American society valued individualism and that human liberty was the core value protected by the Constitution. Free speech belonged to each individual; even criminals were considered



victims of society in need of rehabilitation. On the contrary, in Singapore and Confucius-based Asian countries, individual rights were associated with community interests, each person was to take responsibility for their actions, and laws were strictly enforced for social security. Singapore saw one ruling party and strict social management as the secret to leadership success. In Singapore, the crime rate had dropped sharply since the 1980s. In 1997, Singapore ranked first in the world in terms of safety [10, p.14]. The citizens' faith in PAP's leadership as well as the miraculous development of this island nation had helped PAP to win election after election and continue its leadership ever since Singapore was founded until now.

This analysis had led the leaders of Singapore to believe that crime, punishment and the role of the government in Europe could not be perceived the same as in Asia. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in an interview with Time Magazine, Foreign Affairs decried Americans' attempt to "foist their system indiscriminately on societies in which it will not work" [10, p.11].

There were a number of reasons why Singapore had demonstrated such an independent and resolute attitude towards the United States as regards democracy and human rights. The natural, geographic, economic and strategic characteristics of the Singaporean society were unlike any other nations, even such small ones as Denmark or New Zealand. Given its small size, small but multiracial population, scarce resources, scattered terrain, and strategic location in the interests of major countries and neighboring countries, Singapore needed a compact but effective system of government based upon discipline and, more importantly, upon its people's belief in the state apparatus. Therefore, Singapore's political system could not be "free", "opposing", "open", and "politically competitive" in the Western style. Singapore must avoid two extremes—either military generals or the opposition ruled—since both of them would lead to the fall of the nation. A weak government would mean the end of Singapore. "Democracy for Singapore is an adjustment mechanism to meet the needs of the country." As Lee Kuan Yew once said, "what a country needs to develop is discipline rather than the Western-style democracy." This debate over democracy and human rights lasted throughout the 1990s.

Singapore's refusal to become a non-NATO ally of the United States (2003)

Singapore and the United States had established close ties in most aspects of national defense and security:

- Use of military bases and military deployments: Shortly after the U.S. was forced to withdraw its troops from the Philippines' Subic Base in the late 1980s and early 1990s (the America's last one in Southeast Asia then), Singapore opened the door for the U.S. to use its own military bases and continue the American presence in the region. In 2000, Changi Naval Base was inaugurated in Singapore and had since been regarded as a major base of the U.S. military [9, p.215]. Singapore also became an important hub for the U.S. troops during the Middle East Wars of 1990 and 2003. In 1991, Singapore allowed the U.S. to relocate its headquarters of the Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific (COMLOG WESTPAC) to Singapore, where it could moderate joint drills throughout Southeast Asia.

- Bilateral joint exercises between Singapore and the U.S. with many countries: Since 1995, Singapore has been a center for joint exercises between the USN's Seventh Fleet and Southeast Asian nations (commonly known as CARAT), planned and managed by COMLOG WESTPAC. In 2000, the Singaporean army participated in the Cobra Gold major exercise, formerly known as the joint exercise of the U.S.-Thailand [15].

- Singapore as a pioneer in supporting U.S. policies and initiatives: Under any circumstances, Singapore contended that the U.S. had every reason to start the Iraq war, even though no mass murder weapons had been found in Iraq. Singapore was the first country in the region to strongly support all security initiatives launched by the U.S., first of all the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which in agreement with the U.S. seized all ships carrying cargoes that could be used for producing chemical weapons or rockets.

- The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in 1990 and followed by the 2003 Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) for a closer defense and security partnership between Singapore and the United States in most fields: use of military bases, joint drills, equipment supply for the Singapore military forces, cooperation in training and researching national defence technology... [1, p.11]

The overview of collaborative activities above had shown how proactive Singapore was in



advancing its U.S. ties and increasingly tightening the strategic partnership. Singapore's relational strengthening because of the American role in the regional security and the benefits of bilateral relations, nevertheless, did not mean that Singapore would be on the U.S. side in any case. In the context of the strong economic rise of China, whose ambition was to enhance both its hard and soft power, along with Japan and India's rapid growth, the progress in global relations was very unpredictable. Meanwhile, if Singapore agreed to become a major non-NATO ally of the U.S., it would indicate that Singapore chose to take sides with the U.S. against China and other socialist countries, and then Singapore's economic benefits in its partnership with China would seriously suffer should there be any conflict or tension in the "sensitive" relations between these two powers. In 2003, Singapore therefore refused the U.S. request for its Major Non-NATO Ally status, which had been approved by the Philippines and Thailand, and the two countries had formally become U.S. allies through prior agreements [15]. Obviously Singapore was very flexible in its foreign relations; although it was not, by definition, a major non-NATO ally of the U.S., Singapore could still enjoy almost all of the benefits of being a U.S. strategic ally in Southeast Asia and effectively exploit the substantial profits that came with its bilateral defence and security relations with the United States.

Singapore as a major security partner (SFA), more than a friend yet not an ally

In October 2003, Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and U.S. President George W. Bush negotiated on the Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defence and Security (SFA), amidst the war against terrorism launched on a global scale. It was not until July 2005 that SFA was officially signed after a complicated negotiation process. SFA held special significance in Singapore-U.S. relations, having truly made a turning point and upgraded Singapore-U.S. relations to a "new level" that was more extensive [5, 3].

With reference to the nature of SFA, the two sides had perceived each other as "a major security partner, further than a friend yet not an ally". This wordplay stemmed from the Singaporean perspective, in which Singapore asserted its commitment to the U.S. in all aspects while not bound as an ally. The term "Major Security Cooperation Partner" was first used - according to Singapore's explanation as well as SFA's content - to be "suitable for the post-Cold War era";



whereas "alliance" having always targeted at another country would "no longer be suitable" in today's international partnerships.

The clever word use in naming Singapore-U.S. official relationship in the SFA acted as Singapore's refusal to become a major non-NATO ally of the United States. In parallel with affirming and enhancing its bilateral relations with the America, Singapore wanted to pursue an open, neutral, non-aligned policy so that it could establish relationships with other countries at the same time.

With the signing of SFA, Singapore would also like to affirm that whilst it aimed to promote the relations with India, and China in particular, and appreciated China's growth as a prominent event in the early 21st century's global relations that benefited Asia, it considered the U.S. indispensable for the development and survival of Singapore and "for the security, harmony and stability in the region". Singapore's philosophy made two sides of a relationship equation: Singapore-China and Singapore-America remained forever immutable; the better on the one side, the better on the other side; and there would be no improvement on the first side at the expense of the second side [9, p.215].

Difference in opinions regarding the war against terrorism

Since September 2011, the G. Bush administration had modified quite a few crucial points in its "national security strategy"; for instance, it had come to regard anti-terrorism as the first priority in U.S. relations with other countries and consider 9/11 a good opportunity to implement a global plan of "intervention and expansion" with many tough measures.

In the war against terrorism, the U.S. needed allies like Singapore, hence the Singapore-U.S. relations started to flourish. In its worldwide anti-terrorism strategy, America selected Singapore to be the first country in Asia to implement initiatives namely the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI), Automatic Identification System (AIS) to be installed on merchant ships, Container Security Initiative (CSI), and Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).

On its part, Singapore was the first Southeast Asian nation to fully support America, yet its idea was to conduct the combat both militarily and ideologically.

In his speech to Council on Foreign Relations upon a visit to the U.S. in July 2004, Mr. Goh Chok Tong expressed Singapore's perspective on the battle against terrorism and Islam as follows:

This brings me to my third and perhaps most important conclusion. Just as the Cold War was an ideological as well as geopolitical struggle, the war against terrorism must be fought with ideas as well as with armies, with religious and community leaders as well as police forces and intelligence services. This ideological struggle is already upon us. The terrorist threat has moved beyond any individual or group. It has become a global menace. Unless we win the battle of ideas, there will be no dearth of willing foot soldiers ready to martyr themselves for their cause...

We know that we should work with the moderates and isolate the extremists, but as we seek to separate the wheat from the chaff, we need to recognize that both come from the same plant. How we seek to engage and encourage the Muslim world to fight their ideological battle against extremists must reflect this sensitivity and awareness [12, p.79]

According to Goh, the extremists must be separated from the vast majority of moderate Muslims and must not be allowed to take advantage of Islam as opposed to the West and to let terrorism become religious confrontation. For that purpose, the U.S. had to promote its comprehensive collaboration with Islamic countries, helping them to develop education and training, to create jobs, and to bring women equality. If the Americans failed to build trust among most Muslims in the world, they would lose the war against terrorism ideologically.

As such, in the presence of 200 officials who had an influential say in the U.S. foreign policy, Mr. Goh Chok Tong publicly voiced Singapore's different opinion as to how the war should be conducted. This proved that Singapore was very "frank" and wise in that it did not follow but never upset the U.S., which would do harm to the relations of the two nations.

Several remarks:

- In relations with the United States, Singapore always put its national interests, survival, and development first and foremost:

As Lee Kuan Yew once said, Singapore could only develop alongside the sustained world order, stability, peace and regional prosperity instead of war and conflict. At the same time, he emphasized that it was vital for Singapore to have 'overwhelming power on its side' [7, p.1]. Its small size and limited natural as well as human resources had urged Singapore to maintain the regional security and stability so as to concentrate on developing its economy, modernizing its military, and cementing its diplomatic impact. It was thus the strategy of Singaporean government to borrow political and military power from the major countries outside of the region, namely the United States [6, p.2].

As Singapore and the U.S. unfailingly shared the same viewpoint of stability, security and prosperity maintenance in Asia, the Singapore-U.S. relationship had come a long way from 1990 to 2012, based on bilateral benefits for the two countries. Consistently Singapore was in favor of the American comprehensive presence in the region for the sake of regional peace and stability while curbing China's powerful rise and limiting current traditional along with non-traditional area security challenges, which, as Singapore always worried, were likely to exert a significant impact on the development, even the survival of Singapore. This relationship was pragmatic, effective, and quite popular among post-Cold War international relations.

It was said that, "There are no permanent enemies, and no permanent allies, only permanent national interests." Singapore had always pursued a foreign policy based upon its national interests and the survival of this island nation. If there were any disagreements with America over international relations, Singapore had always frankly expressed its views, never giving in to principles related to national interests. Singapore was consistent with its independent and autonomous foreign policy with the United States, clearly demonstrating a self-reliant attitude and refusing to deny itself and protect its interests by all means in relations with the major powers.

- Singapore's independent and autonomous policy in relations with the United States was influenced by a factor called China:

In Singapore-U.S. diplomatic political relations, there was a two-way impact factor under the name of China. The increasingly tough strategic confrontation between America and China might divide Southeast Asian nations into opposing sides and put Singapore in an uncomfortable situation. Despite the obvious pro-Western view on many global issues, it was very unlikely that Singapore would take sides with the U.S. against China in any future conflict or crisis (if applicable).

With 78% of its population being Chinese Singaporean in addition to hundreds of thousands immigrants from Mainland China [11], plus its multifaceted ties with China and huge profits from the economic relations with this country, it would be hard for Singapore to fully support the U.S. and turn away from China. Also, the China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was the very first comprehensive one China signed with another Asian nation. At some point, Singapore was China's biggest ASEAN trading partner, whereas China was also Singapore's third largest trading partner in 2008 [7, p.3]. The bilateral trade between the two countries increased from US\$2.9 billion in 1990 to US\$75 billion in 2010 [9, p.212]. Not only were huge economic benefits the main driving force behind Singapore's development but they had become a factor that the Singapore government would have to consider in its policies with America.

Especially when the motive of interest replaced communism in Chinese ideology, most politicians and businessmen in Singapore still found it difficult to see China as a menace. At the same time, Singapore felt that it was vital that it express sensitivity, to some extent, towards its neighboring countries. This explained its consistency with the policy of strengthening Singapore's comprehensive cooperation with America, which had been a bilateral relationship upgraded to further than friendship yet not alliance, along with the fact that Singapore did not accept the U.S. proposal to become a non-NATO ally in 2003. Singapore's objective was to keep a balance between the major countries in the region, in accordance with its founding principle of "impeding the regional domination of any major power". In this tripartite relationship between the U.S. - Singapore - China, needless to say the U.S. still overtook China in Singapore's foreign policy.

- Singapore's foreign policy was peaceful, neutral, and non-aligned:

In a press release when US Vice-President Biden visited Singapore in July, Mr. Lee highlighted that, 'Singapore has been a friend of the United States, and also of India, Japan, China as well as other major powers. And we would like to continue this good friendship with all countries.'

In order to protect itself, Singapore had implemented a policy of balancing its forces with regional and global partners, coupled with a peaceful, neutral, non-aligned foreign policy [16, p.67]. In parallel with remaining in good relations with the neighboring countries, integrating regionally, improving its partnership with China, Singapore had become an important partner to others like the U.S., Japan, and India. This strategy attracted other major powers to engage in the regional stability with America playing an outstanding role.

Despite drawbacks in Singapore-the U.S. relations, their defence relationship had grown closer and closer. Most importantly, Singapore's view was to support the Americans' active presence in the region, which nonetheless did not mean that Singapore would participate in any American attempts against China. Singapore's siding with the U.S. officially and obviously would be damaging to the important and growing relationship with China and other neighboring countries, where there were such crucial political factors as Islamism or skepticism towards America as well as the conceptions of preserving national and regional security with internal resources.

In conclusion, Singapore had been a strategic security partner of the United States but not an ally, making this a very specific relationship that reflected Singapore's flexibility and creativity in its planning and implementation of an independent and autonomous foreign policy.

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