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# Threading the Needle: Singapore in an Age of Great-Power Competition

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## Key Judgments

- Singapore’s leaders have assessed that the prevailing global order – defined by deepening interdependence, globalization, and multilateralism – in which they thrived is undergoing significant change in the direction of heightened protectionism, exercise of power politics, retreat of globalization, and multilateralism in duress. This new landscape poses fundamental questions for the city-state.
- At the heart of the issue is that the United States and China, both of whom Singapore has deep ties with, have changed in how they are defining and pursuing their national interests globally.
- Using a wide range of diplomatic and political platforms, Singapore has steadfastly, audibly, and articulately rejected the binary narrative of “choosing sides” between the United States and China.
- Singapore has directly confronted the challenge of conceptualizing and advancing new initiatives and efforts to shape (and reshape) the global order around emerging strategic and policy domains.
- As it pursues this brand of internationalism, Singaporean leaders have been cognizant of the need to present a clear value proposition to the great powers as these new frontiers take shape, and that its old playbook may no longer be relevant for the future of their relationships with the two great powers

## Singapore’s Role and Importance as a Middle Power

Despite its miniscule size (roughly comparable to New York City or Shenzhen), Singapore is widely recognized as one of the most forward-leaning members of international society. It is an active advocate of multilateralism not only in rhetoric but in practice, having spearheaded initiatives such as the Forum of Small States; the COVAX international vaccine supply initiative, which played a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic; the P4, which laid the groundwork for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and later the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP); and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement. These initiatives were not driven by any aspiration to be counted among the ranks of middle powers, however the term may be defined. Indeed, none of Singapore’s leaders — from its founding prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, to its current prime minister, Lawrence Wong — have entertained such visions of grandeur. Rather, foreign policy activism has been an existential imperative for the city-state.

Since securing independence in 1965, Singapore has remained keenly aware of the impact external developments can have on its security and survival as a small state.<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that its leaders have adopted a fatalistic view of geopolitics. As this paper will show, this has never been the case. Rather, Singapore’s leaders and foreign policy decision-makers have always been clear-eyed about the country’s geographic and resource constraints, and about how these limitations shape the strategic options available in responding to the challenges beyond its shores. None have articulated this as clearly as the late Lee Kuan Yew, who in 1966 famously employed a marine biology metaphor to describe the challenges confronting the newly independent country:

“From time immemorial, that was the order of nature. And now, the big European fish are being pushed out so that the stage is set for local big fish to settle terms with small fish, and small fish with shrimps. And we, having the smallest area in the region, must naturally be concerned. There are various types of shrimps. Some shrimps stay alive ... Species in nature develop defense mechanisms. Some shrimps are poisonous: they sting. If you eat them, you will get digestive upsets. Obviously then, some small creatures have got their own defense mechanisms. And we have got to discover our own survival techniques.”<sup>2</sup>

These remarks illustrate the “realist” outlook that still dominates Singapore’s foreign policy thinking, and it is against this backdrop that the nation’s sovereignty and survival are invariably intertwined with economic considerations. Specifically, Singapore’s security depends on its ability to sustain its relevance to the global economy as a highly integrated and effective international financial and trading hub. Put simply, Singapore “must trade with all to survive.”<sup>3</sup>

Building on these framing observations, this paper explores Singapore’s diplomatic, economic, and security relationships with both the United States and China against the backdrop of intensifying great-power competition. By unpacking Singapore’s foreign policy across three frontier domains — technology, climate, and multilateralism — we see how Singapore has sought to adapt to an age of great-power rivalry while maintaining strategic autonomy amid growing centrifugal pressure. This analysis advances three core arguments.

- Using a wide range of diplomatic and political platforms, Singapore has steadfastly, audibly, and articulately rejected the binary narrative of “choosing sides” between the United States and China.
- Singapore has directly confronted the challenge of conceptualizing and advancing new initiatives and efforts to shape (and reshape) the global order around emerging strategic and policy domains.
- As it pursues this brand of internationalism, Singaporean leaders have been cognizant of the need to present a clear value proposition to the great powers as these new frontiers take shape.

As I have argued elsewhere, “As a small country whose relevance to the international community is not at all self-evident, and that is heavily dependent on economic linkages with the rest of the world, not least the major economies of the United States and China, it behooves us to make ourselves relevant to their strategic, economic, and commercial interests, so that neither would want to make us choose.”<sup>4</sup> The underlying rationale is simple. Great powers, by definition, have little time and bandwidth to consider other states, including middle powers, unless they are directly relevant to their own interests and objectives. As a result, it stands to reason that it is in Singapore’s best interests to be relevant to great-power interests even as the country pursues its own priorities.<sup>5</sup>

## ***Historical Overview***

The story of Singapore’s economic development is often traced to its origins as one of the premier entrepôt ports during the British Empire — a fact acknowledged in its own historiography and geoeconomic strategy. Correspondingly, the city endeavored to become a global metropolis and trading hub in the world economy, whether under British colonial administration or the post-independence government led by the People’s Action Party. As then-Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam described vividly in 1972, “the alternative to not moving into the global economic system is, for a small Singapore, certain death.”<sup>6</sup>

Driven by this existential impetus, Singaporean leaders have assiduously pursued global capital by courting foreign investors, transforming the city-state into a manufacturing base of choice by the 1970s and, from the 1990s onward, into a global hub for international finance and services. Underlying and amplifying this perspective is the belief that, as Singapore is a small state that obtained independence during the turbulent years of postwar decolonization in Southeast Asia, regional security and stability are paramount for its prosperity, growth, and development. This combination of security and economics shapes how Singapore views and approaches its relations with today’s two great powers, the United States and China.

# Relations with the United States

Singapore has long enjoyed close relations with the United States, to the extent that U.S. officials often characterize the security relationship as more substantial than those Washington maintains with certain formal allies. As a regular buyer of U.S. military equipment and technology, it has had privileged access to cutting-edge Western military research over the years.<sup>7</sup>

During the height of the Cold War, Singapore's avowedly anti-communist leadership saw the United States as a vital bulwark against the spread of communism in the region. Consequently, Singapore was one of the most vocal advocates of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Later, during the similarly controversial and unpopular Iraq War in 2003, Singapore also cast its lot with the United States despite the challenges this posed for managing sentiments among its own Muslim-minority community. At the time, the decision was justified on the grounds that it was in Singapore's interest to demonstrate commitment to the United States as a friend and partner, irrespective of the limited assistance they could provide. It was also informed by a strategic calculation that, having already declared a global war on terror, the United States could not be allowed to fail—especially since Singapore itself was confronted by a terrorist threat in the form of the Jemaah Islamiyah regional terrorist group.

Much discussion about the U.S. role in the region revolves around the perennial question of the reliability of American commitment, particularly in light of diminishing resources and growing public fatigue for the country's many costly overseas conflicts.<sup>8</sup> Aware of the risks of U.S. disengagement, Singapore has played an instrumental role in facilitating the forward deployment of American assets in the region. Describing the depth of the security relationship in [year], Prime Minister Lawrence Wong noted:

"[I]t is a security and defense relationship that has proven mutually beneficial for both sides, spanning many, many decades. We appreciate fully how America has spilled blood and treasure to provide security for the region. We appreciate fully the security umbrella that America provides for peace and prosperity in this part of the world. And we lean forward to work very closely with the U.S.; we provide access to our air and naval bases, we support rotational deployments, we provide logistical support, we exchange intelligence, we not only purchase technology and military equipment, but we have a very productive two-way exchange of information in many areas of security and defense, and that has proven to be mutually beneficial for both sides."<sup>9</sup>

However, the strength of the relationship is not limited to security. The U.S. role in Singapore's economic story has been equally consequential. Singapore is the only country in Southeast Asia with which the United States has a free trade agreement (FTA). Signed in 2004, the U.S.-Singapore FTA was made possible by a decade of diplomatic and political legwork as well as economic negotiations.<sup>10</sup> While the United States is not Singapore's largest trading partner, it maintains a trade surplus with the country, recorded at slightly under \$40 billion in 2025; this differentiates the United State's relationship with Singapore compared to other export-oriented countries in the region.<sup>11</sup> Given their focus on the trade balance, this data point will unquestionably be a foreign policy priority for the Trump administration going forward. The United States also remains the largest source of foreign direct investment in Singapore by a considerable margin. In 2025, cumulative U.S. investments totaled more than \$467 billion—more than U.S. investments in China, Japan, and South Korea combined—and nearly 6,000 American companies are currently domiciled in Singapore.<sup>12</sup> According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Singapore alone accounts for nearly half of U.S. investments in the Asia-Pacific, underscoring its status as an established global investment hub in Asia and its relevance for U.S. commercial interests.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to say, however, that bilateral relations have not experienced downturns, or that foreign policy

preferences and positions are consistently in lockstep. Ties with the United States hit a low point in the mid-1990s, when a U.S. citizen in Singapore was caned for the crime of vandalism. Before that, Singapore condemned the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada and remains at odds with the United States on other issues, including Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the value of the global trading system.

As an economy heavily reliant on global trade and the free flow of commerce and investments, Singapore views the current American impulse toward mercantilism with grave concern. Singapore was one of the most vocal advocates for U.S. leadership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). For this reason, the Trump administration's abrupt dismissal of the pact in January 2017 marked a low point in the economic relationship, even if the TPP was not strictly a bilateral issue. Indeed, Singaporean leaders made clear that while they understood the domestic impetus for the withdrawal, the move still jeopardized the United States' standing in the region as a "resident power." Former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong did not mince words when he lamented that the U.S. withdrawal "considerably undermine(d) American credibility and seriousness of purpose, and confidence in America all over the region."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, although Singapore embraced the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), it did so with a clear-sighted appreciation of the risks. There was awareness that IPEF could be sacrificed on the altar of domestic politics as the TPP had, or that it was simply an inferior replacement. Those fears have since been realized as IPEF diminished to the point of irrelevance in President Donald Trump's second term, ushering in an alarming new era for American global trade policy.

## Relations with China

As Chinese foreign policy under Deng Xiaoping shifted away from the revolutionary objectives of Mao Zedong, China's paramount leader in the mid-1970s, Singapore's Cold War suspicions of Chinese revolutionary intent gradually gave way to cautious engagement. The two countries first initiated cultural exchanges and encouraged tourism, and then gradually grew bilateral trade. When Deng launched his economic reforms, he adopted the "Singapore model" as a reference point, aiming to replicate the country's success, which further fueled trade between the two nations.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, when Singapore normalized ties with China in 1990, it was the last country in Southeast Asia to do so, having refused normalization until both Malaysia and Indonesia had acted. This delay demonstrated sensitivity toward its neighbors for whom relations with China were complicated by domestic difficulties between ethnic Chinese migrant and Indigenous communities. While Malaysia normalized relations with China on May 31, 1974, Indonesia only did so on August 8, 1990. This paved the way for Singapore, the only nation with an ethnic Chinese majority outside of Greater China, to follow suit on October 3, 1990.

As previously mentioned, the delay in normalizing ties with Beijing belied the fact that relations had already been developing along several paths following the tumult of the Cultural Revolution in China. Indeed, from the mid-1970s onward, ethnic Chinese clan associations in Singapore had begun organizing tours for members to visit their ancestral homes. Small business delegations soon followed, invariably led by ethnic Chinese commercial elites who formed the backbone of what became an explosion of bilateral trade and Singaporean investments in China.

While political and diplomatic ties with China have steadily improved over the years, Singapore has occasionally found itself on the receiving end of Chinese displeasure. In July 2004, shortly before Lee Hsien Loong was appointed prime minister, he made a private visit to Taiwan. Chinese media and intelligentsia protested vehemently, accusing the city-state of harming China's "core interest." Later, during heated exchanges at a July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting, then-Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reportedly glared at his

Singaporean counterpart while making his now-infamous comment: “China is a big country and others are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”

On November 23, 2016, China impounded Singaporean military vehicles en route to the city-state after military exercises in Taiwan.<sup>16</sup> While the vehicles were ostensibly confiscated for customs violations discovered following routine inspections, many saw it as an expression of displeasure with how Singaporean leaders had been vocally championing international law following the July 12, 2016, UN Arbitral Tribunal decision on a case brought by the Philippines, which invalidated the historical basis for China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. The fact that Singapore never named the claimants in their statements about the decision cut no ice with Beijing.

A further bilateral issue of a particularly sensitive nature is the complex cultural, linguistic, and ancestral ties connecting the majority of Singapore’s population — ethnic Chinese Singaporeans — to the Chinese mainland. To be sure, these ties allowed Singapore to make inroads into the growing Chinese economy, especially in the early years of the country’s opening up. At the same time, these ties can dampen relations when Beijing attempts to make common cause with the ethnic Chinese Singaporean population to influence the nation’s foreign policy choices.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these events, economic ties between China and Singapore have progressed steadily. Singapore has been China’s largest investor country since 2013, when China also displaced Malaysia and the United States as Singapore’s largest trading partner.<sup>18</sup> Three signature projects in China in which Singapore invested — Suzhou Industrial Park (1994), Tianjin Eco-City (2008), and Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (2015) — demonstrate the strength of government-to-government relations between the two countries. Even as Chinese priorities shifted away from these projects to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Singapore leveraged its managerial expertise and brokerage capacity as a financial hub to augment its relevance for China and facilitate some of the initiative’s operations.<sup>19</sup> According to some estimates, as much as “a third of outbound BRI investments and 85% of all inbound BRI investments will pass through Singapore shores.”<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Singapore’s role remains confined to soft infrastructure and capacity building, in part because the city-state’s affluence and technological capabilities mean that it does not require the BRI to meet its own infrastructure development goals.<sup>21</sup>

## Great-Power Competition: The Fallacy of the Binary in Singaporean Eyes

As U.S.-China competition grows more acute, discussions on geopolitics have centered on “choosing sides” as a new Cold War dawns. At issue is whether a given state — in this case, Singapore — will choose to align strategically with the United States or China as great-power competition grows more adversarial across various domains. Underlying this is a belief that U.S.-China strategic competition is increasingly — and perhaps inevitably — imposing binary choices on friends and allies, despite claims by both powers that they have no intention of doing so. As scholar and former U.S. official Victor Cha plainly put it, “Governments around the world have to contend with demands for allegiance by Beijing and Washington on a range of security and economic issues.”<sup>22</sup>

Casting geopolitics in such binary terms reflects a great-power vantage point, with an underlying premise that any gain by one power automatically erodes the relative power and influence of the other. While this approach may shed light on great-power dynamics, it is less helpful when it comes to illuminating the perspectives of other nations, namely those that are being forced to choose.<sup>23</sup> Despite the current geopolitical

climate, a vast majority of states do not hold — nor do they accept — this binary worldview. Given today’s deeply interconnected and interdependent world, it is difficult, if not impossible, to envisage global affairs returning to the blocs that characterized the Cold War. Using the great powers themselves as an example, China remains the largest trading partner of the United States outside of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), and the United States and China renewed their Science and Technology Cooperation Agreement in December 2024 — notwithstanding diplomatic tensions and saber-rattling between Washington and Beijing.

A second point warrants consideration: if choice is foisted on smaller states, it may not have the desired effect of strategic alignment. In this regard, it is important to appreciate that since the end of the Cold War, the essence of regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific has been openness, inclusivity, and rules-based cooperation. These principles govern the proverbial “alphabet soup” of regional initiatives and institutions around which this architecture is constructed. Regional states are committed to these collective efforts to reinforce stability and growth, but the binary approach of great-power geopolitics works against these principles. Indeed, decision-makers in both Washington and Beijing should be aware that — having endured colonialism, occupation, and violence during World War II and the discomfiting effects of the Vietnam and Korean wars — most regional states have developed a deep aversion to great-power politics. It is against this backdrop that Singapore’s response to the narrative of choice should be unpacked.

Singapore’s leadership has vocally and categorically rejected this binary geopolitical narrative. When asked how Singapore would approach relations with the United States and China in the context of the present downturn in bilateral relations between the two powers, former Prime Minister Lee explained in 2024, “We know what their basic attitudes are, and the basic contradictions between the U.S. and China remain. ... Therefore, in this troubled environment, we want to be friends with all sides and to have mutually beneficial relations with all sides.”<sup>24</sup> This deceptively straightforward response in fact constitutes the fundamental guiding principle of Singaporean foreign policy, addressing the question of “choosing sides” between the United States and China in an era of great-power rivalry and geopolitical contestation.

Singapore has long been vocal about the roles of the two great powers in regional affairs, well before their bilateral relationship took its current sharp downturn. Early in his tenure as prime minister in 2007, Lee argued that the United States was irreplaceable as the region’s security guarantor: “We would like to see America continue to play a positive role in the region ... Security-wise, it’s crucial. The Chinese cannot take over this role.”<sup>25</sup> In a 2016 interview with *Time*, after the dust from the global financial crisis had settled and in the face of Chinese economic ascendancy, Lee remained “very reluctant to say that American is on a downhill slope,” noting that both the United States and China faced challenges. He concluded that while U.S.-China relations were “reasonably well-managed,” in the interviewer’s words, irreconcilable differences and a lack of strategic trust remained.<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, these observations proved prescient. Soon after, U.S.-China relations shifted decisively.

In 2020, Lee penned an article for *Foreign Affairs* about the implications of a U.S.-China confrontation. Questioning whether the United States could move past its view of China as an existential threat and whether China could assume a more responsible and self-confident great-power role, Lee highlighted the dilemma facing smaller countries when forced to choose between the two. Just as he noted that China could not replace the United States “security-wise” in 2007, he remarked in 2020 that neither can replace the other in the economic sphere.<sup>27</sup>

The first known reference by a Singaporean public official to “choosing sides” appeared in a 2010 *New York Times* article quoting then-Ambassador to the United States Ashok Mirpuri.<sup>28</sup> The first instance of a political officeholder introducing the notion then came in September 2012, when Lee warned that regional states might be “forced to choose between major powers” during an address to the Central Party School in Beijing,

shortly after a Sino-Philippine standoff in the South China Sea.<sup>29</sup>

It has since become a recurrent theme in regional discussions on geopolitics, with Singaporean foreign policymakers expressing their displeasure with a zero-sum geopolitical game. As Lee shared in a interview with the BBC in 2021: “It is not possible for us to choose one or the other because we have very intense and extensive ties with both the U.S. and with China, economic as well as in other areas, and so do many other countries in the world.”<sup>30</sup> Elaborating on this view, Teo Chee Hean, the senior minister who oversees security issues, opined, “We have said that we don’t choose sides. But people sometimes misunderstand that by not choosing sides, we don’t have a view. That’s not true, we have a view, we choose principles.”<sup>31</sup> What’s more, Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam has emphasized that the United States and China must work together to address global challenges such as nuclear proliferation and climate change. To that end, choosing sides “is highly disruptive, either for our security or our economy or many other aspects.”<sup>32</sup>

This is not to say that Singapore is ignorant of the centrifugal forces generated by great-power rivalry, or blind to the reality that pressure from either power might compel a choice. Lee has also conceded the unvarnished truth of this dilemma: “If you are friends with two countries which are on different sides, sometimes it is possible to get along with both, sometimes it’s more awkward when you try to get along with both... I think it’s very desirable for us not to have to take sides, but the circumstances may come when ASEAN may have to choose one or the other. I am hoping that it’s not coming soon.”<sup>33</sup>

It would be a mistake to dismiss these statements as cavalier rejections of the narrative of choice, when in fact they offer a window into how Singapore’s decision-makers view the country’s role in the context of great-power rivalry. From Singapore’s perspective, aligning with one great power at the expense of the other is not considered a viable option. Instead, the primary strategic response to intensifying geopolitical competition is the creation of maximum latitude and space for autonomy. To that end, Singapore has resisted pressure to align itself with either power not so much as a hedging strategy but as an expression of sovereignty. Its stance reflects an intent to embrace opportunities proffered by both American and Chinese technological advancements and their respective international value chains while minimizing geopolitical risks.

In keeping with its tradition of proactive, forward-looking foreign policy, Singapore has sought to bridge the growing gap between the United States and China. Its senior leaders regularly engage their counterparts from both great powers, cautiously but opportunistically seeking to alert them to global concerns regarding their escalating rivalry. Ultimately, Singapore believes that great powers will naturally “do what great powers do,” with little regard for the interests of small states. Acute strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing, however, has severely limited Singapore’s ability to push for U.S.-China cooperation, either through bilateral efforts or multilateral mechanisms, on “over-the-horizon” issues such as climate and AI governance.

At the same time, there is growing concern that geopolitical room for maneuver is shrinking as U.S.-China competition has accelerated following Donald Trump’s return to power. The escalating trade war between the United States and China, driven by the administration’s reciprocal tariffs, now poses an existential threat to Singapore, an economy for whom global trade is a lifeline. This is all the more true as U.S. officials blatantly use market access as leverage to pressure other nations on their trade relations with Beijing, while Chinese President Xi Jinping has explicitly warned states against undermining Chinese interest when negotiating with Washington.

Notwithstanding the increasingly difficult geopolitical climate, great-power tensions have also offered Singapore opportunities. As global technology and electronics companies pursue geographical diversification to avoid entanglement in U.S.-China competition, Singapore has conceptualized new initiatives and modalities of international collaboration in frontier domains. In assessing how Singapore is navigating — and eliding

— the specter of choice, this paper will now examine three key areas: technology, climate, and multilateralism.

## Navigating the Technology War

The U.S.-China competition over technological primacy has been addressed in detail elsewhere and need not preoccupy this discussion.<sup>34</sup> The point to stress is that this competition sets the stage for Singapore as it pursues its national objective to be a global hub for advanced technology development. These efforts are notable because they have been undertaken in close collaboration with U.S. and Chinese government and private sector interests, all while sidestepping the vicissitudes of great-power competition — such as tariffs, export controls, and market restrictions — that threaten to fragment the global tech order.

Today, technology is a cornerstone of Singapore's economy, and it will be so for the foreseeable future. To illustrate the growing importance of these sectors, in 2002, semiconductor manufacturing accounted for 80% of Singapore's electronics output, which constituted 7% of its gross domestic product, 11% of the global semiconductor market, and 20% of global semiconductor equipment.<sup>35</sup> To bolster its appeal to global technology counterparts — most certainly from the U.S. and China — the city-state committed \$25 billion to research, innovation, and enterprise in 2020 as part of an assiduous and ambitious five-year research and development plan. Meanwhile, its state investment firm, Temasek, has earmarked \$1 billion for deep-technology investments.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, Singapore has positioned itself as a major startup capital. Between 2022 and 2024, Singapore has risen from 18th to seventh largest in the global tech startup ecosystem, behind only Silicon Valley, New York City, London, Tel Aviv, Los Angeles, and Boston, and ahead of Beijing, Tokyo, Seoul, and Shanghai.<sup>37</sup> This rise was fueled by the highest venture capital funding per capita globally.<sup>38</sup>

Aside from heavy investments in its indigenous tech ecosystem, Singapore has capitalized on its ties with global tech powers, leveraging its competitive advantage as a business-friendly regional hub to attract both American and Chinese multinationals. With its strong talent base in engineering and data science, world-class tertiary education, and pro-business environment, Singapore hosts over 80 of the world's top 100 technology firms and continues to draw interest from those seeking an operational base from which to target growing Asian markets.<sup>39</sup> Chinese tech giants like Alibaba, ByteDance, and Tencent have expanded operations in Singapore, driving up the value of Singaporean engineering talent. This, in turn, enhances the advanced capabilities Singapore offers these multinationals.<sup>40</sup> The booming e-commerce industry in Singapore, a gateway to the region via the emerging ASEAN e-commerce infrastructure, has also been a target for Chinese commercial tech giants, as demonstrated by Alibaba's \$1 billion acquisition of a controlling stake in local e-commerce firm Lazada in 2016.<sup>41</sup> Huawei has also sought to attract Singaporean talent through incubation centers and collaborations, such as the Southern Pacific OpenLab in 2016, a cloud and AI innovation lab in 2019, a virtual AI Academy in 2020, and a host of research memorandums of understandings with top Singaporean universities.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to Chinese tech companies' emerging interest in Singapore, U.S. technology is already deeply integrated into Singapore's core technology infrastructure and its accompanying supply chains. Given that the United States remains Singapore's largest investor, Singapore remains an attractive destination for advanced technology companies, especially semiconductor manufacturers and data centers, seeking to relocate and diversify their operations from Greater China in the wake of the continued deterioration in U.S.-China relations.<sup>43</sup>

Progress with the United States in cybersecurity has been especially significant. Three memorandums of understanding covering the public, defense, and financial sectors followed then-Vice President Kamala Harris' visit to Singapore in 2021.<sup>44</sup> After then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's reciprocal visit to the United States in 2022, a U.S.-Singapore Cyber Dialogue was initiated, catalyzing further bilateral cooperation through inter-agency exchanges.<sup>45</sup> Notably, there has been no comparable cooperation with China to date.<sup>46</sup>

Amid increasing cooperation with the United States and China, Singapore has had to tread carefully around tech competition. As the fourth industrial revolution dawns, decades of rapid state-led economic development have led China to aspire to global tech leadership, captured in slogans such as "Made in China 2025." Under the banner of the Digital Silk Road, part of the BRI, it also aims to be a major exporter of digital infrastructure-building capabilities. While this technological ambition is motivated by great national pride, there is a sharp security edge as well. It is driven by the imperative of reducing vulnerability to U.S. technological dominance, which finds expression in Washington's regulatory reach and the commercial power of Big Tech. Chinese aspirations have rendered the geopolitical dimension of tech competition more acute, provoking a backlash rooted in American concerns over challenges to U.S. dominance.

Here, the primary American argument is that China's drive for technological dominance has benefited unfairly from immense state funding, distorting the market and creating an uneven playing field. Additionally, there is concern that augmented Chinese technological prowess, especially in dual-use technologies, would translate into advanced military capabilities — a concern rendered more acute by the Russia-Ukraine war, where Russia allegedly benefited from Chinese dual-use technologies. Presumably, this would pose a security threat to of the United States and its allies. Consequently, the United States has deployed an arsenal of unilateral and multilateral tools against purported unfair economic practices, illegal intellectual property theft, and the export of authoritarian technologies and values. Beijing has responded with its own punitive measures, albeit not in equal measure.

This action-reaction dynamic poses a perennial security dilemma for Singapore and prompts concern over "technological decoupling" as Chinese technological development faces greater U.S. scrutiny, particularly in the advanced semiconductor sector, which has been subject to sweeping restrictions. That Washington has exerted political pressure on allies and partners further heightens concerns.<sup>47</sup> Acutely cognizant of the need to avoid political and security backlash, given the scrutiny of Chinese technology development by a reinvigorated U.S. regulatory environment, Singapore has taken care to ensure that joint commercial and technological ventures carry minimum risk of spilling over into sensitive domains. Regulatory authorities have endeavored to sensitize private sector entities and universities to the need to understand and adhere to U.S. export controls. Singapore has also reinforced its own regulatory framework through legislation such as the Cybersecurity Act.

In recent years, a major pain point has been the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. The growing 5G capabilities of Huawei — the Chinese telecommunications giant suspected by U.S. officials of having ties to the People's Liberation Army — and subsequent American responses have become emblematic of this struggle. U.S. concerns over Chinese access to the ICT architecture of U.S. allies has prompted Washington to encourage, and in some cases compel, circumspection toward technology from Huawei. The company was eventually placed on the U.S. "Entities List" and designated a national security threat by the FCC.

Notably, while Huawei bid to be a vendor for Singapore's main 5G network, the contracts were awarded in 2020? to Scandinavian providers Ericsson and Nokia to work with local telecommunications companies.<sup>48</sup> Huawei's absence from the list of service providers undoubtedly raised eyebrows, especially since Singapore, unlike U.S. allies, had never issued a formal ban on Huawei. In fact, Huawei continues to be a vendor for other

network elements through China TelecomGlobal (the Chinese company for which Huawei is a vendor) and has been a critical supplier of cloud technology to the city-state.

Any reservations about the use of Huawei equipment in the core 5G network derived not from security concerns but from the realistic possibility that the entire system could be crippled if further U.S. regulations undermined Huawei's ability to operate effectively. In other words, this move aligns with the larger strategy of diversification to minimize supply chain disruptions caused by geopolitical competition.

## Energy and the Climate Change Challenge

Amid expanding competition, climate change has emerged as an issue where the United States and China might find common cause, as evidenced by previous collaborations. Until the sharp downturn in bilateral relations, Washington and Beijing had managed to work together to address the global challenge of climate change, as seen in their joint leadership in securing the passage of the 2015 Paris Agreement.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, given its transnational and global nature, the climate crisis intuitively lends itself to a convergence — if not alignment — of interests. Yet the harsh reality is that neither assumption appears to provide sufficiently robust common ground. Still, some bilateral efforts to foster convergence remain, such as the U.S.-China Working Group on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s. Moreover, the Trump administration's open hostility to green energy and decarbonization suggests a discomfiting misalignment of objectives with Singapore, while pushing prospects for U.S.-China climate collaboration even further out of reach.

Given its status as a low-lying, small island state, Singapore is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. As a result, it treats the issue as nothing short of an existential challenge.<sup>50</sup> In public statements and policies, Singapore has made it clear that climate action is a priority, particularly in the document titled, "Singapore Green Action Plan 2030," which details its climate strategy. The plan identifies five priorities, including increasing green spaces in the land-scarce city-state, reduction waste and water consumption, increasing use of solar energy, advancing green finance and sustainability entrepreneurship, and enhancing coastal protection.

Significantly, Singapore's mitigation efforts have gone beyond domestic policies and approaches. Since climate change is a transnational issue, Singapore has sought to facilitate greater regional and multilateral cooperation while positioning itself as a hub to support green transition efforts across Southeast Asia.<sup>51</sup> These initiatives include the Climate Action Package in 2018, which assists environmental efforts in regional countries and fellow island states. Singapore has also played a key facilitator role in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations, enabling the adoption of crucial declarations and partnerships at COPs since 2015. Additionally, the country contributes experience and financial support to ASEAN-led initiatives and workshops, partners with the International Civil Aviation Organization and International Maritime Organization to reduce transport emissions, and cooperates with various states to facilitate carbon markets and low-carbon energy sources. In 2023, Singapore launched Financing Asia's Transition Partnership (FAST-P), a blended finance initiative involving global private and public partners to support decarbonization efforts in Asia.<sup>52</sup> In 2024, the nation pioneered the Transition Credits Coalition (TRACTION), a financial instrument designed to help Southeast Asia shift from coal to more climate-friendly energy sources.

Singapore has made noticeable headway in two areas by parlaying its status as a global financial center and its tradition of forward-leaning diplomacy. First, it has facilitated green finance to incentivize environmentally friendly projects both domestically and across Southeast Asia, targeting low-carbon, efficient energy use in real estate and transport. Green finance taps into Singapore's longstanding advantages as a regional hub

for financial institutions and multinationals domiciled in the country. Moreover, to encourage these shifts, domestic banks have incorporated environmental, social, and governance (ESG) foci into their priorities, and Singaporean financial regulators have shared experiences and best practices through relevant multilateral financial forums since 2015.<sup>53</sup> The Monetary Authority of Singapore initiated the green bond market in 2017; today, Singapore accounts for about 50% percent of ASEAN's market for green bonds and loans.<sup>54</sup>

A second area in which Singapore proactively shaped international engagement and norms is sustainable urban planning and design. The city-state's successful and effective urban planning in areas such as waste management, sustainable real estate, and public transportation has positioned it as a global leader that openly shares its knowledge in various international forums. Singapore has leveraged its expertise by establishing initiatives like the biennial Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize. Launched in 2008 and named after the nation's late founding prime minister, the award recognizes global achievements in sustainable urban development while enhancing knowledge and capabilities. Singapore also participates in international city networks, like the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, the ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, and World Cities Summit.<sup>55</sup> As chairman of ASEAN for 2018, Singapore seized the opportunity to establish the ASEAN Smart Cities Network to develop partnerships among leading cities and improve South Asian smart cities initiatives.<sup>56</sup>

Efforts to combat the climate crisis have also involved separate cooperation with the United States and China. With the United States, Singapore signed the U.S.-Singapore Climate Partnership in August 2021. Since its launch, the agreement has undergone several rounds of refinement aimed at establishing medium- and long-term goals for climate action, marking a substantial collaborative effort to build capacity, improve environmental governance and standards, drive sustainable research and development, and devise low- and zero-emission solutions.

With China, cooperation has centered on ongoing government-to-government projects, such as the Tianjin Eco-City. New collaborative initiatives center on green growth, low-carbon living, ecological resilience, innovation and talent development, and governance. A signature development from this partnership is the establishment of a Green and Digital Shipping Corridor (GDSC), the first of its kind, which aims to foreground green growth in Tianjin and further decarbonization efforts across the broader maritime industry. Progress has also been made in green finance, which is a priority for both China and Singapore. In April 2023, the respective authorities — the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) and the People's Bank of China (PBC) — agreed to establish a China-Singapore Green Finance Taskforce (GFTF), tasked with deepening bilateral cooperation in green finance and facilitating greater public-private sector collaboration in decarbonization.

## Championing Multilateralism

That the global multilateral order is in crisis became readily apparent during the first Trump presidency, when the U.S. leader hardly hid his disdain for multilateral institutions. This disregard translated into policy in the form of U.S. withdrawal from a slew of multilateral agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Paris climate accords, alongside threats to withdraw from NATO and the World Health Organization (WHO). Following Donald Trump's return to office, the United States formally withdrew from the WHO in January 2026.

Amid major global transitions and transformations, Singapore maintains that as a small state, it must use every tool at its disposal to reinforce the importance of international law, international organizations, and multilateralism. This is not because these instruments are perfect — far from it. Rather, the logic that is that

despite their deficiencies, they serve as important levelers for smaller states, especially when great-power politics threaten to overwhelm them. For Singapore, a functioning multilateral global order predicated on international law is critical. As Lee Hsien Loong explained, “For small countries like Singapore, multilateral institutions, systems, and laws are critical for our survival. These give us a stake in the global commons, and a means to defend and advance our interests. A rules-based system imposes responsibilities on all countries and creates a stable environment for all. This is why Singapore is a staunch advocate of the UN, international law, and of the multilateral system.”<sup>57</sup>

Singapore has long been a proactive member of the international community, not only as a participant but as progenitor of several initiatives and minilaterals. These include the Global Governance Group and the Forum of Small States. Singapore was also part of the P4, which set the stage for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and later evolved into the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economic Partnership Agreement (DEPA), among others. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid a lack of leadership from major powers, Singapore and Switzerland initiated and co-chaired the Friends of the COVAX Facility, which played a crucial role in the global distribution of vaccines. Additionally, Singapore chairs the UN Open-Ended Working Group focused on ICT, cybersecurity, and digital cooperation as well as several other climate-specific initiatives discussed previously.

For all its deficiencies and shortcomings, ASEAN remains a central pillar of Singapore’s foreign policy and an instrumental vehicle for navigating the centrifugal pressures of great-power competition. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore’s website highlights that “Singapore was one of the founding members of ASEAN when it was formed on 8 August 1967, along with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. As a small nation-state, Singapore strongly supports ASEAN’s goal of building a strong, prosperous and rules-based ASEAN.”<sup>58</sup> Through ASEAN, Singapore has also expressed growing concern for how great-power competition tests the sacrosanct principles of the rule of law and the multilateral order. In 2018, Lee Hsien Loong emphasized, “The international order is at a turning point. The existing free, open and rules-based multilateral system which has underpinned ASEAN’s growth and stability, has come under stress. Countries, including major powers, are resorting to unilateral actions and bilateral deals, and even explicitly repudiating multilateral approaches and institutions.”<sup>59</sup>

Managing the effects of escalating U.S.-China competition while maintaining its centrality in the regional architecture has been a major preoccupation for Singapore’s ASEAN diplomacy. Within Southeast Asia, Singapore has been arguably the most forthright and vocal on the issue. During his tenure as prime minister, Lee made clear the Singaporean view that the United States was the irreplaceable security guarantor in Southeast Asia: With regards to China, he also expressed that ASEAN’s interests lie not in casting Beijing as an adversary, but rather as a partner: “ASEAN cannot counterbalance China [though we] can complement China, yes.”<sup>60</sup>

A prime example of how ASEAN manages the great-power competition unfolding in their backyard is the organization’s response to the challenge of the “Indo-Pacific” concept articulated by President Trump in 2017. To counter potential threats of its regional centrality, ASEAN moved quickly to conceptualize its own version of the Indo-Pacific: the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Adopted by all 10 member states at their Bangkok Summit in June 2019, the AOIP sought to reaffirm ASEAN’s leading role in “shaping and leading the evolving regional architecture that is built upon ASEAN-led mechanisms and to ensure that geopolitical and geostrategic shifts will continue to bring about, and not disrupt, peace, security, stability and prosperity for peoples in the Southeast Asia as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>61</sup> While the AOIP is not without its shortcomings and there is an increasingly urgent need for operationalization, ASEAN’s ability to reach an agreement and come together on its own conception of regional

order is significant. In the face of an evolving strategic landscape, the organization still plays a valuable role for members such as Singapore in navigating new challenges.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Singapore undoubtedly benefited from a global order sustained by U.S. military and economic power for a quarter of a century after the Cold War. But that era has passed. Consequently, Singapore must revisit and recalibrate some fundamental foreign policy assumptions, including the existence of an open trading order, stable great-power relationships, and the ability to maneuver autonomously without making strategic alignment choices. In their place, the nation must contend with rising global populism and protectionism deepening great-power competition that creates centrifugal pressure, and a geopolitical climate where international law is transgressed with impunity by use of force. Against this backdrop, the deterioration of U.S.-China relations remains the paramount concern.

Singapore has responded proactively to this changing landscape. It has actively engaged both the United States and China, seeking to strengthen its bilateral relations with both powers while successfully sidestepping (at least so far) the risks posed by the two countries' deteriorating relationship. At the same time, in the absence of definitive global leadership from either the United States or China, Singapore has endeavored to play an active, forward-leaning role on issues critical to its interests in the coming years.

With these considerations in mind, the following discussion outlines key guiding principles that should inform and govern how great powers formulate policies toward Singapore, and small states more generally, against the backdrop of their own competitive relationship.

First, like the vast majority of states, Singapore does not wish to see the competitive relationship between the United States and China slide into conflict. A full-blown trade war and technological decoupling would be immensely damaging for both great powers but devastating for Singapore. The situation could worsen for all parties concerned if the bilateral relationship turns conflictual. To that end, the United States and China should take great care to maintain effective communications channels and robust guardrails to prevent conflict. Moreover, these channels must be able to withstand inevitable crises and downturns in the relationship.

Second, given both countries' strong relations with Singapore, they should not only respect the sovereignty of the city-state but advocate for its preservation by rejecting policies or positions that pressure Singapore to undermine its own interests. For instance, Singapore's value to the United States and China stems from its reliability as a principled partner. Forcing the nation to choose sides would undermine the very principles that make it a valuable partner, to the detriment of any strategic advantages both powers seek in the Indo-Pacific region.

Third, a great power that foists alignment on smaller states risks unintended outcomes. Such pressure could ultimately undermine its own interests, create distrust, and diminish its credibility.<sup>62</sup> More to the point, it could trigger balancing behavior, where small states choose to align against the source of pressure.

Fourth, the United States and China should both invest political, economic, and diplomatic equity in ASEAN and the wider regional architecture. Such a move would be of great value to Singapore, but more importantly, it would help the great powers advance their own interests. This entails more than paying lip service to ASEAN "centrality" in regional affairs; it requires more concrete commitments to regional stability, such as exercising restraint in the South China Sea or enhancing economic partnerships with the region.

Based on these broader guiding principles, the following sections offer specific policy recommendations for Washington and Beijing.

### ***The United States***

- Maintain a “small yard” approach to its regulatory and punitive measures against China, particularly in the area of technology development. Although the Biden administration originated the “small yard, high fence” concept, and it has since been jettisoned by President Donald Trump, the principle still holds. While Singapore understands U.S. concerns about China, punitive measures against Beijing should still be carefully calibrated to avoid fundamentally undermining Chinese growth. This is not out of altruism but because Singapore’s economic growth and well-being — and that of many other U.S. partners — remains deeply tied to China.
- Enhance contributions to regional security by strengthening bilateral defense relations with Singapore. The United States should build on the U.S.-Singapore Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement to focus on critical and emerging technologies. Deepening technology access for Singapore would foster more robust coordination and interoperability.
- Maintain a strong economic footprint in the region through deepening economic engagement with Singapore, leveraging the city-state’s reputation as a global financial and trading hub. Notwithstanding the Trump administration’s nationalist and transactional approach to trade, a strong U.S. presence in the regional economic architecture would be of great benefit to regional prosperity and stability. Additionally, it would bolster Washington’s position in a high-growth market.

### ***China***

- Leverage its strong economic relationship with Singapore to enhance its role in the region through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Specifically, China should work on green finance and digital trade and governance frameworks. These are not only new areas for promote regional economic development but would also strengthen China’s efforts to further internationalize the RMB.
- Play a stabilizing role in regional security by exercising restraint in South China Sea disputes, acknowledging the inherent power asymmetry between itself and other claimants. In the same vein, Beijing would do well to respect the role of international law in managing these disputes.
- Diversify its cultural diplomacy to expand outreach beyond ethnic Chinese communities in Singapore. This would help dispel concerns that Beijing might leverage its cultural appeal and deep commercial ties to influence foreign policies in states with sizable ethnic Chinese populations. China should recognize that Singapore’s national identity is deliberately multicultural and multiethnic. The assumption that ethnic Chinese Singaporeans should somehow be more sympathetic to Beijing’s interests is not only unfounded but also invariably risk misperceptions and misinterpretations, undermining bilateral relations.

*Statements and views expressed in this commentary are solely those of the authors and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, the Harvard Kennedy School, or the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.*

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