



Other Countries Are Small Countries, and That's Just a Fact: Singapore's Efforts to Navigate US–China Strategic Rivalry

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Then-Chinese Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi, emphatically reminded members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact” (Landler et al. 2010). Of these countries, Singapore is perhaps one of the smallest, with a population just shy of 6 million and a land area slightly more than 700 square kilometers (Central Intelligence Agency 2021a, b). It also happens to be one of the richest, with a *per capita* GDP higher than that of the United States (Central Intelligence Agency 2021a, b). Singapore’s success relates as much to its strategic location at the southern entrance of the Strait of Malacca, between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, attempts to avoid involvement in major international disputes, and efforts to work with various major powers. Such fortuitous circumstances, however, are

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variables rather than constants and may now be undergoing a period of stress and change that Singapore must face.

Singapore's approach to US-China competition so far is to continue claiming that it "does not wish to choose sides" between Washington and Beijing (Chan 2021; Heijmans 2021). This position—in place since the end of the Cold War—depends on two key conditions: that Singapore does not have intractable and indivisible differences with both major powers and that a significant overlap in interests exists between the United States and China. So long as such conditions hold, Singapore has significant flexibility and room for maneuver to maximize opportunities for cooperation with both major powers—that is, Singapore can have its cake and eat it too. Participation in the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), and various trade agreements appear supplementary to Singapore's efforts at developing special relations with Washington and Beijing. Singapore's longstanding approach to managing relations with the United States and China may become more risky and costly as the US-China rivalry intensifies, but whether its leadership can find an adequate and timely alternative remains in question.

If hedging is an effort to adopt countervailing strategies to mitigate risk by enabling the leverage of one set of relations to overcome problems in another, then Singapore's behavior can be construed as "hedging." That said, the wide array of activities that now falls under the rubric of "hedging" may erode the analytical utility of the concept (Haacke 2019). Given Singapore's efforts at performing even-handedness in interactions with the two major powers, some observers also characterize its foreign policy as leaning toward "neutrality" (Guo and Wu 2016; Panda 2020). Nonetheless, Singapore seems to be trying to deepen relations with both the PRC and United States with a view that this can best safeguard its long-term interests. Whether Singapore can extract itself from trouble and shift emphasis from one set of ties to the other, should intractable difficulties arise or find itself entrapped in the web of interlocking interests linked to the United States and PRC, remains unknown.

This chapter provides an overview of Singapore's approach to managing relations with the United States and China, including increasingly apparent limits and possible options. I begin with a conceptualization of how Singapore historically managed relations with and competition among major powers in its neighborhood. Next, I provide a perspective on Singapore's attempts at positioning itself among the

United States, China, and its Southeast Asian neighbors, as well as their effects on Singapore's economic and strategic fortunes during the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A next section examines how shifts in first Beijing's foreign policy outlook and then Washington's position given the growing rivalry between the two major global powers affects Singapore's foreign policy. Subsequently, I explore the options available to Singapore in a more contested global context and their associated risks, where US-China collaboration can no longer be taken for granted. The conclusion seeks to weigh Singapore's prospects navigating a world where the US-China relationship is more contentious.

BETWEEN GIANTS

Trying to make the best of any situation is an underlying consideration for a small actor like Singapore, since its small size and capabilities prevent it from affecting the international system in any deeply meaningful way. Singapore's "not choosing sides" approach to managing relations simultaneously with the United States and China seeks to do exactly that: find opportunities to maximize the gains from cooperation while avoiding confrontation (Chan 2021). Singapore is, in many ways, well placed to exploit such a role. It poses no ideological or strategic threat to either major power, unlike say a Cuba, North Korea, or Taiwan. Working with Singapore can benefit both Beijing and Washington given its fortuitous location and role as an established commercial and financial hub serving Southeast Asia as well as the world. Singapore simply needs to avoid offending either power.

So long as Washington and Beijing have significant shared interests and an aversion to tension, therefore, Singapore can enjoy substantive freedom of action and flexibility as seen from the diagram below. A large policy space created from overlapping US and Chinese interests' means that Singapore can adopt a large variety of positions on a wide range of topics without issue from either major power. Decreasing convergence between the United States and China obviously shrinks this space and limits the range of options available to Singapore. Actions have a greater potential to upset one or both of major powers since this may more easily reduce a major power's advantages *vis-à-vis* the other, given that greater contestation likely heightens sensitivities toward relative gain. Given Singapore's size, especially next to the major powers, pressure and retaliation can be relatively easy for Washington and Beijing (Fig. 12.1).

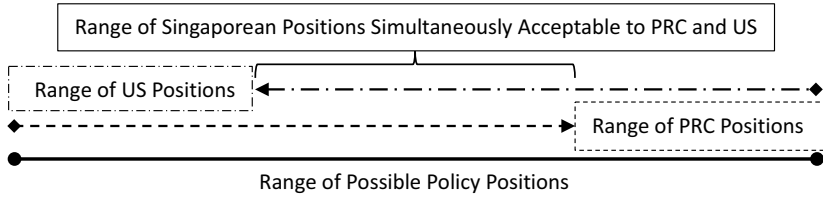


Fig. 12.1 Singapore’s room for maneuver between the PRC and United States

Certainly, Singapore is not the only party, trying to manipulate its position in the policy space between Washington and Beijing. Other actors can face similar circumstances and choices. How each chooses a position relative to the United States and China depends on their own interests, perception, domestic politics, and appetite for risk. This perhaps explains why various Southeast Asian actors adopt differing positions despite all claiming to be seeking “not to choose sides” between the United States and China. Indonesia’s efforts to find a mediating role between Washington and Beijing differs from Cambodia’s China-friendly position and Vietnam’s acceptance of some friction with Beijing, for instance (Caroline 2021; Ciociari 2021; Emmers and Le Thu 2021).

For much of the second half of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first, Singapore and others stood to gain from the United States and China’s desire for cooperation. China’s rising prominence, albeit at a slowing rate, and the United States’ rising dissatisfaction with these trends and own relative—not absolute—decline means that this freedom of action and flexibility for smaller actors like Singapore has been diminishing over the past decade. Such trends look set to continue. With fewer easy options, Singapore faces greater risk and higher stakes in its dealings with the two major powers whose relationship will shape Asia and the world in the coming century. How Singapore’s current political leadership envisions a way ahead in this new environment remains unclear. The following sections will contrast the opportunities in the Sino-US relationship available to Singapore up until the first decade of the twentieth century with the greater tumult and more limited returns from trying to find a middle path between Beijing and Washington.

COOPERATION AND PROSPERITY

Having gained independence during the height of the Cold War, Singapore's foreign policy traditionally sought to maintain amiable relations with all major powers even as it cultivated close ties with the United States. Singapore's much lauded public housing program drew partial inspiration from the Soviet Union as it sought to develop from the model inherited from British colonial rule (Pugh 1987). Despite occasionally bristling in public about what its leadership saw as undue US influence, Singapore's long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP) generally sought closer economic and security ties with Washington (Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs 2021a, b). The PAP even made Singapore available to vacationing US troops on leave from the Vietnam War despite popular opposition and protest stemming from anti-war and anti-colonial sentiments (Ang 2009). Singapore even increasingly acquired US military equipment and training as it attempted to build up its armed forces (Chua 2014).

Singapore's relationship with the United States was amicable on a variety of fronts throughout the Cold War and beyond. On defense ties, Singapore began hosting a US Navy logistics command and regular stopovers by US military ships and aircraft in 1992—following the closure of US military bases in the Philippines—even as its procurement of US military equipment increased (Huxley 2000: 412–419). This was followed by a series of strategic partnership arrangements that saw the rotational deployment of US Navy ships to Singapore and the island state's access to advanced arms sales and military technology usually available only to allies (Huxley 2000: 412–419). The Singapore Armed Forces also increased training in the United States. From the 1980s, Singapore's political, bureaucratic, and military elites increasingly sought higher education and training in the United States, realigning from a previous reliance on the United Kingdom for such expertise and experience (Huxley 2000: 412–419).

Affinity for the United States in Singapore owed much to the fact that it provided a convenient and profitable partner. The liberal post-World War II international order provided the trade- and foreign investment-reliant Singapore economy with significant opportunities for growth, something Singapore took full advantage of (Lee 2019). The liberal international order's focus on institutional restraint and rule of law afforded Singapore with a degree of assurance and formal equality with other,

much larger actors as it sought to participate in various international fora. Singapore's high-quality English language education also meant that its elites had an advantage in the Anglophone-dominant setting of the US-led order. Working with the United States was also less sensitive for Singapore as it fit with the conservative, anti-communist inclinations of its neighbors during the Cold War and enabled Singapore to avoid being perceived as a PRC front, given its demographics (Ang 2009).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-ruled People's Republic of China (PRC) presented a special challenge to Singapore. Singapore's ethnic Chinese majority population has strong traditional family, social, cultural, and economic ties with the Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan areas, and has traditionally been targeted for support, recruitment, and mobilization by political actors in China (Soon et al. 2018: 9–103). The PAP's turn toward an anti-communist position in the early 1960s as it first sought integration into Malaysia and then independence made it especially wary of communist influences coming from the PRC, a sentiment that heightened as the CCP sought to “export revolution” in the mid-1960s (Hong et al. 2013). Relations only improved in the late 1970s as the CCP shed the Cultural Revolution and embarked on its Opening and Reform course, under Deng Xiaoping (Zheng and Lye 2016). Singapore, ASEAN, the PRC, and the United States even found common ground in opposing the Soviet-supported Vietnamese Communist government's invasion and occupation of Cambodia from 1979 to 1989 (Ang 2013).

Complicating matters for Singapore-China ties is the Singapore state's relationship with its Mandarin-educated ethnic Chinese population. Singapore's British colonial government, the Malaysian state, and the Anglophone elite dominated PAP administration all viewed the Mandarin-educated segment of Singapore's ethnic Chinese population with some suspicion, particularly for being pro-PRC communists or communist sympathizers (Wong 2000, 2003). Part of the reason was the left-leaning, anti-colonial proclivities of this group of people, who were active in labor and student movements from the 1950s through the 1970s—including some who were originally part of the PAP but later purged (Thum 2017). Consequently, successive regimes in Singapore targeted key leaders among them for detention without trial, banishment to China, or the stripping of citizenship while also absorbing their associations and schools under state control (Hong et al. 2013). Even though such efforts were successful in

crippling autonomous political organization among Mandarin-educated ethnic Chinese in Singapore, it created a group of people who have an attachment to the PRC as being representative of “orthodox” Chinese culture.

Singapore also had concerns about the PRC that went beyond communism, involving instead worries about ethnic sensitivities in its own region. Politics in neighboring Indonesia and Malaysia took on anti-Chinese ethnic and anti-PRC dimensions in the 1950s and particularly the 1960s, with the resulting civic unrest spreading into Singapore in some instances (Kathiravelu 2016). The coup that deposed Indonesia’s leader Sukarno in 1965—the year of Singapore’s independence—led to anti-Chinese violence (Cribb and Coppel 2009). Such conditions made Singapore leaders nervous about seeming too closely associated with the PRC and risk being portrayed as a Chinese fifth column in Southeast Asia, thus inviting hostility from its neighbors. As a result, Singapore only established official relations with the PRC in 1990, after Jakarta resumed regular diplomatic ties with Beijing that had been broken after the 1965 coup (Lye 2018).

With the calming of regional politics following the end of the Cold War, Singapore began once again to accept migration from China, both temporary and permanent. On one hand, Singapore welcomed professionals and high net worth individuals and their families to settle down, bringing with them skilled labor and investments (Bork-Hüffer 2017; Lee 2014). These immigrants also helped Singapore maintain its ethnic ratio—something successive PAP administrations consider important—given low birth rates among ethnic Chinese (Frost 2021). On the other, low- and unskilled transient workers from China helped provide a low-cost labor pool for Singapore’s industries (Dutta and Kaur-Gill 2018). However, with a general uneasiness toward immigration, Singaporeans complain that these newer immigrants from the PRC contribute to overcrowding and rising cost of living while being unwilling to integrate more fully into local society (Lee 2021a).

Nevertheless, one of the most evident effects of Singapore’s maneuvering between Beijing and Washington—from independence through the first decade of the twenty-first century—was rapid economic growth. Singapore was able to build on growing US-China economic cooperation beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating in the early 2000s to enhance the role as a commercial and financial hub it first developed under British colonial rule. China has become Singapore’s largest bilateral

trading partner in goods—as it has with most of the world’s countries—while Singapore is the largest foreign investor in the PRC (Department of Statistics Singapore 2021c). Behind these developments lies US investment into Singapore, which makes the United States Singapore’s largest foreign direct investor in terms of both inflows and stock (Department of Statistics Singapore 2021a). These conditions place Singapore at the nexus of global value chains and production networks, fueling its economic growth and making it into one of the richest countries in the world on a *per capita* basis, even if inequality remains a serious and growing challenge (Ng et al. 2021). Such behavior is perhaps what gives the impression that Singapore’s management of US and PRC ties actively involves hedging.

Europe is Singapore’s largest trading partner in services, a sector which accounts for over 70.2% of GDP in 2020 compared to 21.5% accounted for by manufacturing (Department of Statistics Singapore 2021b). Correspondingly, services consistently account for over 70% of employment in Singapore between 2011 and 2020, growing from 70.6 to 75.6%, while manufacturing declined from 16.3 to 12.5%. Even if the PRC is important to Singapore’s economy, especially in terms of trade in goods and as a destination for outbound investment, the United States is no less important. The United States remains a key partner in the trade in goods for Singapore, the largest source of inbound FDI, and the second largest trade partner in services. That Singapore’s other key economic partners such as Europe, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia have close ties with Washington, further increases American economic heft and political clout in Singapore (Figs. 12.2–12.9).

NOT CHOOSING SIDES MAY NOT BE GOOD ENOUGH ANYMORE

Despite the increasingly fraught US-PRC relationship, Singapore’s official response has remained mild, even passive. On one hand, current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong repeatedly called on leaders in Washington and Beijing to restore cooperative ties (Lee 2021b). On the other, senior officials from the Prime Minister down continue to insist that Singapore does not wish to “choose sides” while emphasizing “ASEAN centrality” (Balakrishnan 2021b). Even though both Beijing and Washington publicly stated respect for Singapore’s position, their behavior unsurprisingly appears unaltered. More recent official statements from Singapore

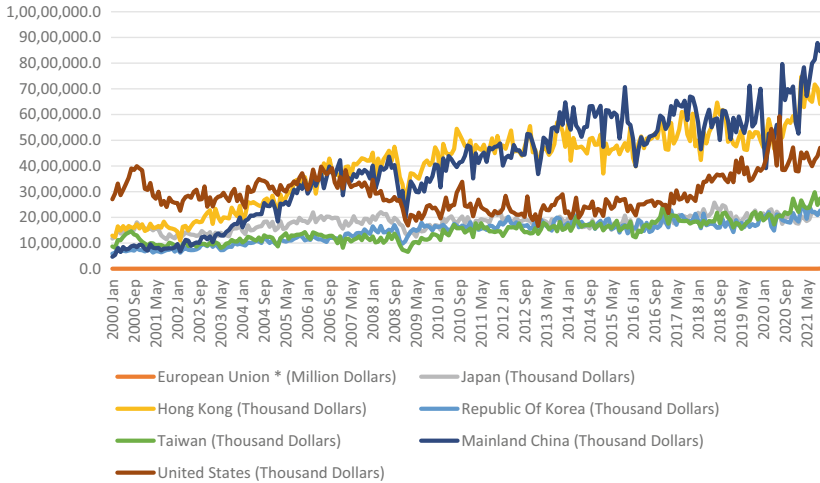


Fig. 12.2 Singapore top merchandise export destinations, 2000–2021 (Source SingStat)

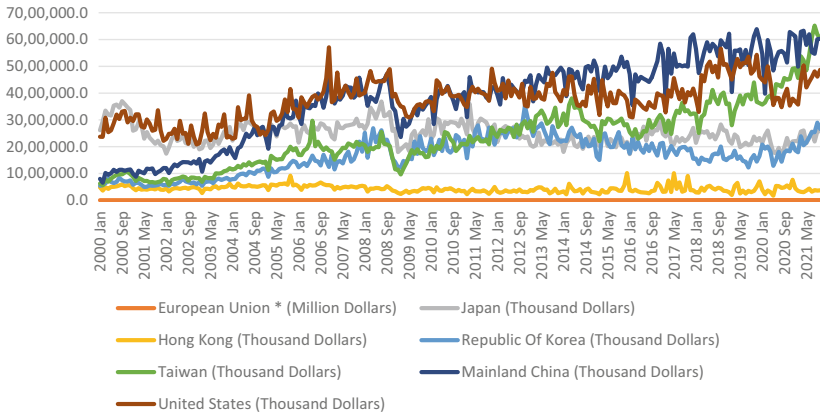


Fig. 12.3 Singapore top merchandise imports sources, 2000–2021 (Source SingStat)

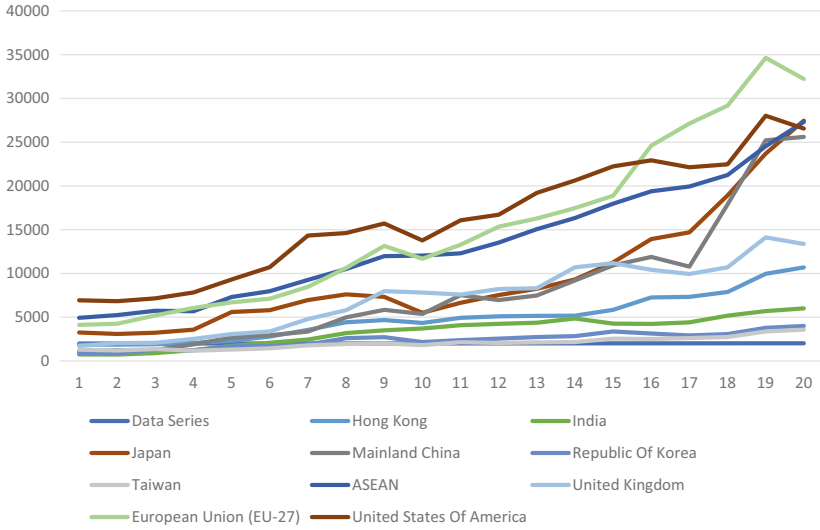


Fig. 12.4 Singapore top service export destinations, 2000–2019 (*Source Sing-Stat*)

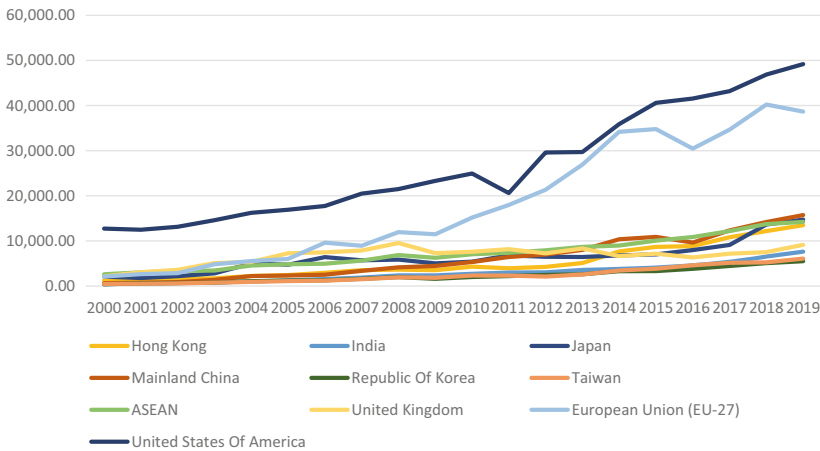


Fig. 12.5 Singapore top service import sources, 2000–2019 (*Source SingStat*)

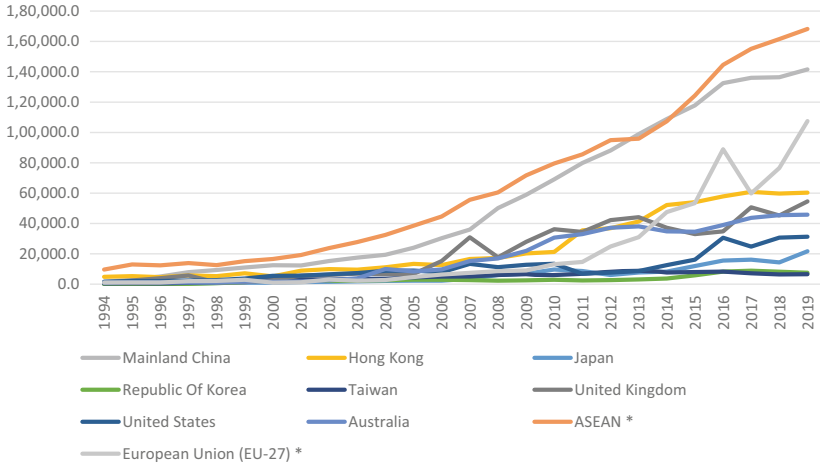


Fig. 12.6 Singapore top destinations for outbound FDI, 1994–2019 (*Source SingStat*)

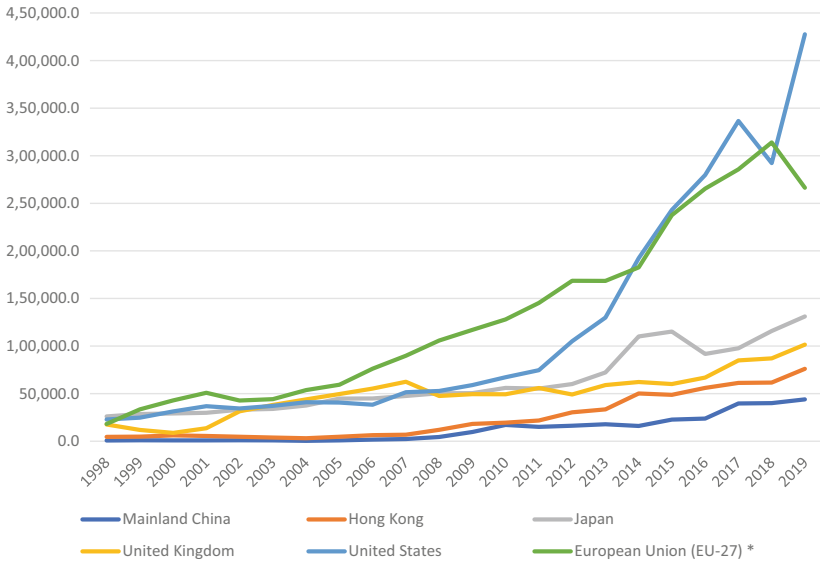


Fig. 12.7 Singapore top sources of inbound FDI, 1998–2019 (*Source SingStat*)

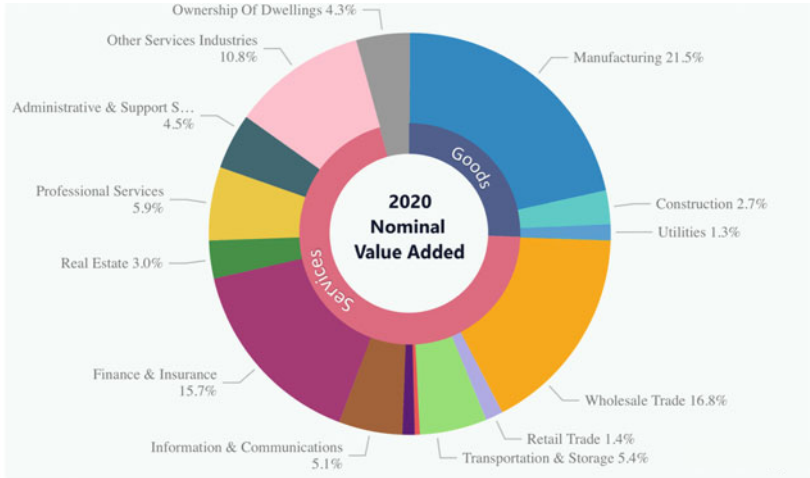


Fig. 12.8 Singapore nominal GDP contribution by sector, 2020 (Source Sing-Stat)

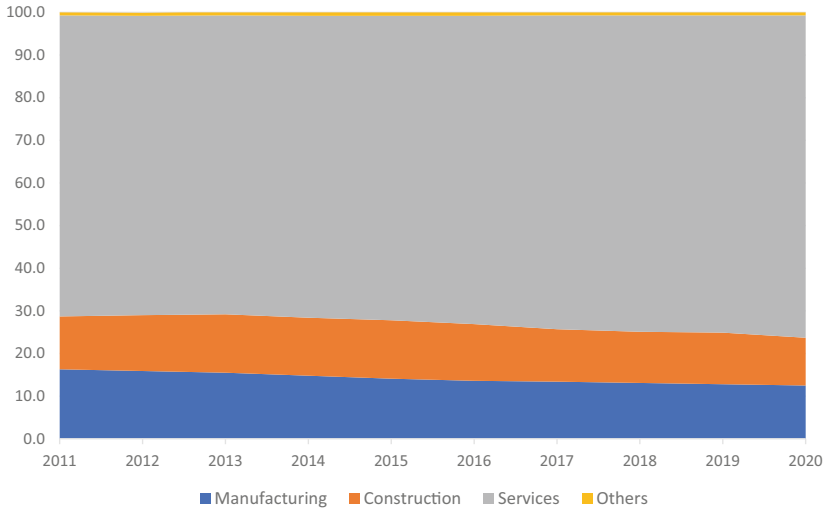


Fig. 12.9 Singapore employment percentage by sector, 2011–2019 (Source Singapore Ministry of Manpower, 2021)

acknowledge the persistence and pervasiveness of robust competition and contestation between the two major powers, as well as Singapore's need to chart a way forward in this world (Balakrishnan 2021a). However, these proclamations have yet to offer much in the way of any clear, concrete policy direction.

Perhaps emblematic of this “in-between” situation in which Singapore finds itself with respect to the United States and the PRC is public opinion in Singapore. Successive Pew polls of public opinion find Singaporean respondents to be more favorably disposed toward the PRC than the United States (Silver et al. 2021). However, surveys of elites conducted by the Yusof Ishak Institute-ISEAS in its annual *State of Southeast Asia* survey find that elite opinion across different sectors is generally more wary of the PRC and its intentions than those of the United States (Seah et al. 2021; Tang et al. 2020). These results indicate that the Singaporean population is just as divided over relations with Beijing and Washington as the state's position between the two major powers. If such public positions inform Singapore's policymaking with respect to the United States and PRC, then it suggests difficulty in making decisions that could undermine ties with one major power or the other.

A result is a wait-and-see attitude among Singapore's leaders that translates broadly into its current “not choosing sides” approach to Beijing and Washington; a position it has been trying to adopt since the 1990s. Sometimes described as “hedging”, Singapore's policy is not so much maintaining equidistance between the two major powers in some sort of neutrality; instead, Singapore seeks to partner and side with both Beijing and Washington on different issues, depending on its interests and considerations regarding the matter at hand, trying to maintain cordial ties with both (Lee 2021b). Such a starting point is what supposedly enables Singapore to have a strategic partnership with the United States that allows training as well as sensitive arms and technology transfers while providing the US military access to ports and airbases (Singapore Ministry of Defence 2019; US Department of State 2005). Concurrently, Singapore invests in municipal-scale infrastructure and commercial projects in the PRC while providing regional headquarters for sensitive PRC technology firms (Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015).

Gains from this “not choosing sides” approach rests on Washington and Beijing having significant overlaps in interest. Singapore can work with one major power on some set of topics and with the other on different issues without upsetting either, affording significant freedom of

action. As differences between the United States and PRC grow, Beijing and Washington may grow less tolerant of such “policy-promiscuity” and become more wary of such apparent lack of conviction despite the benefits they believe Singapore is deriving from their largesse (傅瑩、吳士存。2016). The possibility of becoming suspect in one or both major power capitals as US-PRC competition intensifies and the room for maneuver decreases could spell fewer opportunities that easily avoid major power ire and greater risk of punishment. This leaves Singapore with less scope for autonomy and having to either abandon its “not choosing side” position or accept diminishing returns to its policy.

With growing US-China differences, Singapore’s ability to enjoy the benefits of concurrent engagement with both Washington and Beijing may be diminishing and what were previous advantages may easily become liabilities or obstacles Singapore must learn to dodge. US-China unrest already emerged with Beijing’s wariness toward the George W. Bush administration’s efforts to move forward on the high-quality regional economic agreement that later became the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (宋國友 2016). Differences intensified as Beijing started to contest its claims in the East and South China Seas more forcefully, using maritime militia, military overflights, paramilitary patrols, as well as the reclamation and arming of maritime features (Chubb 2020/21; Liu 2020). Despite beginning his presidency by trying to find accommodation, Barack Obama’s administration witnessed further frictions with Beijing as it sought to oppose expansive PRC maritime claims and extend support to US allies and partners with its “rebalance” to Asia (Clinton 2011). US-PRC ties saw further strain under the Donald Trump administration’s trade war and desire for “decoupling” with the PRC and the Xi Jinping leadership’s robust response, a trend which appears to continue into the Joe Biden administration (Trump 2019; 王子暉。2019).

Among the more pressing issues that Singapore faces amid growing US-PRC divergence is its economic role leveraging and brokering opportunities on both sides of the Pacific. Singapore has long made its fortunes on being a conduit among capital, production, and markets, as well as between various economic centers around the world, a situation that Singapore deftly exploited via the globalization process that followed the end of the Cold War. US-PRC economic tensions resulting from Beijing’s efforts to push for a dual circulation economy and concurrent US attempts at decoupling mean that Singapore may find the lucrative role of facilitating economic exchange and deals diminishing (Heng

2021). There may be less PRC demand for intermediate goods from Singapore for assembly into final products going to the US market, even as the US firms bring some manufacturing back to automated factories in the United States. With the partial exception of wealth management, this could also result into less investment into and demand for services from Singapore given that Singapore does not have the infrastructure demands to tap fully into Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.

Singapore may initially have hoped for more integration with the United States to mitigate its exposure to the PRC through investment and trade in goods. This was manifested in the Lee Hsien Loong government's push for the conclusion of a TPP that included the United States, which would allow Singapore more access to US capital, funds, and technology (Lee 2015). The Lee administration was sorely disappointed in the inability of the Obama administration to have US Senate ratify the TPP and the subsequent US pullout under the Trump administration—not to mention allegations that Singapore was a currency manipulator (Lee 2017). The resulting Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) without the United States is a dilution of the original. Despite Beijing's application for membership to the CPTPP, PRC accession is unlikely given Beijing's longstanding resistance to independent labor and environmental monitoring as well as opposition by existing members (Freeman 2021). Joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that includes the PRC adds to existing free trade arrangements Singapore enjoys but does not provide the more transformative ambitions the original TPP promised (Ranald 2020).

Experiences with apparent US capriciousness reinforce concerns in Singapore about Washington's consistency and commitment to Southeast Asia. Successive Singapore governments have articulated a preference for a strong US presence in the region given that Washington is not party to any territorial disputes and is unlikely to get involved in inter-ethnic sensitivities in the region, unlike the PRC (Cooper and Chase 2020). Singapore has prospered from the stability and economic opportunities offered by the United States and the order it established in the region, with the costs of this presence borne by other Southeast Asian states. However, Singapore faces fluctuations in US' commitment following the Cold War, with questions about engagement arising in the 1990s and early in the Trump administration interspersed with singular focus on terrorism or competition with the PRC (Cooper and Chase 2020: 9–22). These moments of US uncertainty and partial withdrawal

punctuate broader commitment demonstrated during the second term of the George W. Bush administration and the Obama administration's "rebalancing" to Asia between 2010 and 2016.

Complicating matters for Singapore further are what appear to be the development of differing US and PRC technological standards that may have limited mutual compatibility. This great technological divergence is evident in the global struggle over 5G cellular telecommunications, where PRC firms had been seeking commercial dominance, but the US threatened to limit crucial cooperation over security concerns (Lee 2020). These developments could likely spill over into the next generations of telecommunication standards. Singapore elected to partner with Finnish and Swedish providers for its 5G infrastructure after evaluating and experimenting with PRC technologies, even though this move could limit future opportunities in the PRC market (Alley 2020). Such contestation is present in other key emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and facial recognition, and Singapore could again find itself stuck between Washington and Beijing (Shanmugam 2018).

Another area where Singapore found itself in a corner was over international legal standards. Being a smaller actor, Singapore naturally supports international laws and regulations that restrain more powerful actors and provide some level of juridical equality to states like itself with fewer capabilities (Lee 2021b). It just so happens that prevalent international laws and regulations that undergird global order—and from which Singapore historically benefits—were established by the United States and are supportive of US interests. This attitude informs Singapore's approach toward the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and its associated provisions, leading it to support the process surrounding the arbitration the Philippines initiated in response to PRC claims (Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). Such a position earned the ire of Beijing, which in addition to trying to pressure businesses to lobby the Singapore government, seized Singaporean armored vehicles transiting Hong Kong following an exercise in Taiwan (Ng 2017).

Given a continuing desire to work closely with both Washington and Beijing, Singapore has found itself under some pressure from influence operations. These include PRC attempts to shape decisions using elites, business associations, and cultural associations with ties to China as well as efforts to shape perceptions through media, entertainment, and social media (*The Economist* 2021). Such work appears to range from creating

sympathy for Beijing's position on the South China Sea to encouraging suspicion of "the West" represented by the United States as well as promoting doubt over the origins of COVID-19 and "Western" vaccines (Zaini and Hoang 2021). Cultivating and playing up an exclusive sense of ethnic and cultural pride among ethnic Chinese communities in Singapore that dovetail with PRC nationalism could also prove divisive in Singapore's multiethnic society (Qin 2018). Influence operations could be used to sow confusion during a military crisis involving the United States, to slow or derail decision-making relating to the transit of US military assets under Singapore's strategic partnership with Washington. Such a development could potentially damage the US-Singapore relationship.

Playing on the affinities and loyalties of ethnic Chinese Singaporeans marks a partial reversion to Cold War methods of competition for the PRC. Beijing formally ended *ius sanguinis* dual citizenship for ethnic Chinese in the 1950s and stopped tugging at the loyalties of ethnic Chinese communities overseas with the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s (Suryadinata 1997). Respecting the jurisdiction of various states over their ethnic Chinese populations marked an end to Beijing's efforts at intervention, paving the way for a normalization of relations with non-communist Southeast Asia states including Singapore (Chew 2015). Such cross-border mobilization could result in the exacerbation of existing communal tensions. PRC revival of diaspora nationalist mobilization to further its interests during a moment of heightened contestation with the United States hold the potential for similarly destabilizing consequences in multiethnic societies such as Singapore's (Suryadinata 2017).

The fact that US-PRC tensions are pulling ASEAN in different directions likewise presents difficulties for Singapore. ASEAN members states have divergent views on key issues including their relationship with Washington and Beijing, a shared vocabulary about not wanting to "choose sides" notwithstanding (Stromseth 2019). Such crosscutting dynamics erode ASEAN cohesiveness, making the consensus necessary for decisions either challenging to achieve or so watered-down as to become nearly meaningless (Amador 2021; Muhibat 2021). These conditions translate into either stasis—leading to inability to find a common position from which to move forward—to bargaining collectively with the major powers, as seen in the management of disputes in the South China Sea (Hoang 2021). Singapore benefits from a more active, coherent, and robust ASEAN that can provide a platform that amplifies its voice and

visibility, so a grouping rendered less effective by simultaneous US and PRC pressure limits Singapore internationally.

Despite the pressures Singapore faces from intensifying US-China competition, responding directly can prove tricky. Singaporean leaders are cognizant of the punishment of American, Australian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, and Taiwanese businesses following spats over everything from history to nationalist affronts and territorial claims (Anderson 2020). Then there are the detentions of Australian, Canadian, and American citizens for diplomatic rows their governments had with Beijing (Martina 2021; McCuaig-Johnson and Garrick 2021). Singapore also remembers the seizure of its armored vehicles in Hong Kong likely due to differences over support for the arbitral tribunal process relating to the South China Sea that Beijing opposed (Chan 2016). Consequently, the Singapore government appears wary of aggravating Beijing even if serious concerns arise from hacking to influence operations and espionage, where Singapore has sought to avoid publicly attributing any responsibility to Beijing (Singapore Ministry of Communications and Information 2019: 212; Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs 2017, 2020, 2021a, b). Statements of difference are usually mild, seen in occasional reminders that Singapore has its own “one China policy” guiding ties with Beijing and Taipei, which differs from Beijing’s “one China principle” that insists that Taiwan is part of the PRC (Balakrishnan 2017).

Singaporean leaders are far more ready to criticize the United States, which bolster impressions of a recalcitrant US working against Singapore public interest. Recent statements to this effect are repeated use of examples alleging US efforts to support individuals implicated in an alleged Marxist conspiracy that resulted in the expulsion of a US diplomat during efforts to pass legislation on foreign interference (Shanmugam 2019). Some of the motivation for such statements appear to be an effort to mask criticism of states that are more sensitive to negativity, based on an assumption that Washington is more tolerant of rebuke and criticism, fair or otherwise. The PRC is possibly among the real targets for such critique and legislation, given unofficial allegations and suspicions of its global engagement in disinformation and political interference (Jaipragas 2021). That said, repeated casting of the United States as an actor undermining Singapore interests can create lasting impressions of wariness and suspicion toward Washington in the public mind, which can sow distrust and complicate cooperation.

A NEED FOR OPTIONS

Taking a bet on either Beijing or Washington at present can seem perilous to a risk-averse Singaporean leadership given what appear to be high degrees of uncertainty surrounding the outcome of US-PRC competition. Based on this reasoning, holding onto ties with Washington and potentially provoking Beijing's ire could mean punishment as well as siding with an actor in at least relative decline even if it spells the continuation of current benefits from strong Singapore-US collaboration. Siding with Beijing at the expense of extensive economic and security relations with Washington can result in a decline or loss in cooperation with the United States even if it provides some voice opportunities in and early adopted gains from a Beijing-centric order. Of course, there is also no guarantee that the PRC will be a successful challenger to the United States given the former's demographic, environmental, and internal economic pressures, and the United States may reinvent and reinvigorate itself as it had done in the past (Erickson 2021).

Given the above considerations, a Singapore that seeks freedom of action alongside stability and prosperity should be looking at the creation of options that can help safeguard these positions even when US-PRC competition becomes more intense. Behind such an orientation should be an effort to enhance flexibility while buffering some of the shocks and friction that result as Washington and Beijing contest various issues. Several non-mutually exclusive possibilities exist to achieve such outcomes. They include trying to update ASEAN with existing members, working with a subset of more likeminded Southeast Asia states, and developing key partnerships with a collection of other actors with a stake in Southeast Asia. Finding a critical mass of partners may be key as this may provide Singapore with some basis for channeling away major power pressure or even open avenues for collective bargaining, compensating for some of the limitations a smaller actor faces.

Building on ASEAN's past success to refresh the grouping is attractive in being a seemingly modest option that appeals to ASEAN's cautious nature, perhaps even bordering on being conservative. One approach could be to enhance ASEAN's existing capabilities for coordination and administration without changing its mandate or constitution and simply investing more in personnel and resources at Secretariat and developing support personnel (Chong 2018). Such a move could reduce the transaction costs of working through ASEAN and smooth over intra-ASEAN

differences to reduce the propensity for deadlock and encourage greater appetite for more ambitious collective ambitious. Better coordination can also reduce the likelihood of the grouping being split over issues, as seen in discussions over the South China Sea over the 2010s. A refreshed ASEAN may be able to recreate its some of capacity to bargain collectively when working diplomatically and politically with Beijing and Washington in the 1980s in face of the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia (Thun 2021).

Revitalizing ASEAN through reforms may nonetheless prove challenging. Being able to provide material and diplomatic support against the Hanoi-installed regime rested on a commonality that now eludes ASEAN. It was then a quintet of conservative, anti-communist, authoritarian, and developmentalist member states whose shared perspectives on politics and the world reduced collective action and coordination problems. Following expansion in the 1990s and several rounds of democratization, ASEAN members now possess a wider variety of income levels, regime types, and clearer mainland-maritime distinctions—not to mention a Myanmar teetering on failed state status. Even without expanding the group's mandate, efforts to enhance ASEAN effectiveness today is likely to run into strong opposition among members—including Singapore—keen to preserve autonomy and avoid external oversight in domestic matters. In fact, the grouping's limited progress in addressing the aftermath of the coup in Myanmar as well as the spiraling violence and humanitarian crisis there does not augur well for ASEAN and its future (Strangio 2022).

Another option is for Singapore to invest more on a subset of like-minded ASEAN member states, which can take a variety of configurations. One grouping is the six pre-expansion ASEAN members, which allows for a degree of familiarity from decades of cooperation as well as reduced less divergence on income and regime type. This can provide stronger grounds for cooperation. A second is to focus on states with greater capacity for action, including Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Third is just to focus on Singapore's closest neighbors, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia, with whom the city-state has close, collaborative commercial and security relations anyway. Whichever mix Singapore opts for under this scenario, it must recognize that these states are in the middle of their own leadership and regime transitions—much like Singapore—which may translate into a degree of policy instability that may limit policy consistency. Privileging some ASEAN members over others could

also further erode confidence in ASEAN and result in even greater ineffectiveness that could harm the organization's role in amplifying Singapore's broader interests and concerns.

Singapore could as well look toward developing and enhancing ties with actors with a stake in Southeast Asia that share outlooks with Singapore. These could be larger entities states with whom Singapore have a history of cooperation and are seeking a stable partner to help secure their commercial and strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Possibilities include some combination of Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union. An advantage is that these actors have some commitment to more open commercial exchange, international rule of law that imposes some constraint on powerful actors, unhindered access to Southeast Asia, and value a degree of autonomy. Downsides are the fact that these actors have some strategic arrangement with the United States that could spark PRC displeasure, while an impression that such ties come at the expense of ASEAN could further undermine confidence in the organization.

Of course, Singapore could decide to bandwagon with one major power and balance against the other. Siding with the United States draws on Singapore's experience working within the rules-based liberal international order that Washington established after World War II, which proved immensely profitable for Singapore through the Cold War and its aftermath (Balakrishnan 2018). A question would be whether a United States in relative decline is able and willing to maintain or even increase its commitment to engagement in Southeast Asia and around the world, an issue that has gained greater currency since the Trump presidency and later on, since the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Aligning with the PRC promises access to its vast market and possibly its capital, as well as the enticing prospect of having a voice in shaping the order that Beijing promises to build. Apart from doubts over Beijing's success given the structural pressures it faces, however, is the matter of whether the PRC will abide by its commitments given its reinterpretation of Hong Kong's Basic Law and the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

Some combination of the above pathways is possible but risks sending signals that may not be fully consistent with Singapore's interests, given that there is no clear-cut, optimal choice. Any decision that casts doubt on Singapore's commitment to the ASEAN project and indeed ASEAN's viability may end up corroding a key pillar of Singapore's existing foreign policy before a replacement or alternative is ready. This could diminish

Singapore's international voice and visibility, which are especially important for a small state trying to maintain sufficient prominence as to give existing and potential partners a stake in its success. Steps that can be read as siding with one major power over the other, even if that is not the intent, could invite pressure and retaliation that Singapore would much rather avoid. Yet, keeping to "not choosing sides" even as the strategic environment changes with greater US-PRC competition may prove increasingly costly, perhaps even risky, for Singapore.

Singapore may itself be hard-pressed to reach a conclusion on how to navigate a world with more pervasive and extensive contestation between Washington and Beijing. In an ideal world, it can lean on a grouping of like-minded entities that enables collective bargaining where necessary, while removing the immediacy of rivalry in Singapore's environs and over issues it cares about. Such a grouping should also support a rules-based international order that can restrain major power accesses, the economic openness that historically allowed Singapore to thrive, and a platform to amplify the concerns of a smaller actor. However, no such option is readily available, and all potential partners come with their own baggage in terms of relations with Washington and Beijing. These conditions point to a need take a calculated bet on an uncertain future, something that Singapore's leaders generally shy away from, but are especially uncomfortable with as they grapple with their own leadership transition difficulties. Nonetheless, using its small size and nimbleness to take the initiative to develop options and alternatives may serve Singapore better than simply waiting around as the world changes.

CONCLUSION

Singapore enjoyed relative ease in its handling of relations with the United States and PRC since independence. Much of this had to do with largely undisputed American pre-eminence in maritime Southeast Asia during the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War years, coupled with significant overlaps in US-PRC interests. Singapore could enjoy a wide berth from both Washington and Beijing, not having to worry about aligning more with one side or the other. The luxury of existing in this position is diminishing as Sino-American rivalry builds. That PRC and US interests are diverging translates into decreasing toleration of deviation from Beijing and Washington's preferred positions by the two major powers, meaning

to say ambiguity and difference acceptable before may be less palatable today.

Efforts to engage both the United States and PRC substantively over a range of issues make Singapore's approach to major power relations seem very much like it is hedging. Thinking behind this longstanding policy seems to be to provide Washington and Beijing with significant stakes in cooperation and stability in Southeast Asia, while expanding the value of a successful and autonomous Singapore to leaders in both major power capitals. That the ability to adjust and reorganize relations within one of the two major powers in response to major downturns in ties with the other seems absent suggests that Singapore's position perhaps demonstrates more enmeshment than hedging traditionally understood (Goh 2007; Terhalle and Depledge 2013). Singapore may stand to gain from interactions with the PRC and United States as a result, which indeed it has since the end of the Cold War. However, this approach may prove riskier for Singapore should US and Chinese interests diverge and even conflict, as it places greater strain on the ability to manage and profit from concurrent positive ties with both major powers.

Coming up with an appropriate response to the new reality of heightened US-PRC tensions is therefore going to be a major challenge facing Singapore's foreign policy. So far, efforts have focused on trying to find some new sweet spot between Beijing and Washington. However, not only are the availability of such Goldilocks positions decreasing, but they are also constantly shifting with the changing dynamics and contours of US-PRC competition. This puts pressure on Singapore's policy of trying to play to both sides in the ongoing major power contest, which could make it appear duplicitous in one or both major power capitals. Attempting to simultaneously work with Washington while enjoying the benefits of cooperation with Beijing is not only more difficult, but it also diminishes Singapore's advantages of agility in foreign policy.

If Singapore does not wish to make an overt alignment or believes in a need to hold out on such a decision for as long as possible, it should be trying to develop options for itself that do diversify from the United States and the PRC. Limiting and managing dependence on either major power could in principle provide Singapore with more strategic space. However, Singapore's traditional ASEAN partners are increasingly finding their own directions in relations with the two major powers and other issues, prompting a misalignment in interests within the grouping and

a fraying of the organization's common positions. Other potential partners for the development of closer relations tend to be either directly or indirectly tied to one major power or another. Opportunities for a risk- or cost-free choice are becoming scarcer for Singapore, especially given that Singapore society and their leaders have put off a more serious conversation about the recalibration of strategy over the past decade.

Accepting some sort of new trade-off among autonomy, security, and prosperity may be something Singapore must consider for its future. Having its cake and eating it may become more difficult for Singapore. However, making bold moves may be something with which Singapore's current technocratic leaders are unfamiliar and uncomfortable, especially when compared to seeking incremental change. Complicating matters are the uncertainties of the protracted leadership transition within Singapore's long-dominant People's Action Party. This reduces the propensity for Singapore's leaders to take the initiative when trying to find their way in this brave new world of more turbulent US-PRC relations, with the high likelihood of spillover effects into a range of issues and domains in Southeast Asia and beyond.

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