Small state in a turbulent world: A survival guide

How countries like S'pore can manage the intensifying push and pull of great power rivalry in a rapidly changing world order.

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Singapore has done well for the last 60 years since independence. We weathered the ups and downs of global financial crises, recessions and structural reforms, but the intense geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, and Russia, after the annexation of Ukraine, has converted our region, East Asia, unprecedentedly into a dangerous hot spot.

There is no doubt our internal good governance and cohesion contributed hugely to our success. We became an internationally renowned successful example of American universities leading to a bipolar world during the Cold War. Fortunately, after our independence, the underlying conditions or trends were for the integrations of the world economies and globalisation. These trends imposed small states like Singapore to make a living and prosper and may be a living and prosper through globalisation and the decision to adapt the market economy with “socialistic characteristics” and engage with the world economy created tremendous opportunities for many countries, but particularly our region to grow with it.

A FRAGMENTED MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Since years later, tacit shifts are under way and the world order that we operated in is changing rapidly. We are familiar with the term of the dominance of the US and Europe and the rising tide of China and the US. The flow of international and the US and US dominated and resumed in the US, the rise of capitalism and the free market economy. The US itself is a product of a long history of hegemonic impositions or a superpower in return or withdrawal, but has returned in a superpower in full force actively seeking to counter China’s challenge to its leading position. The dominance of the bipolar order has given way to a fragmented multipolarity.

Since the Chinese war, we clearly see the US and its European allies joined by US dominated China on the stage of the world. They have jumped to the conclusion that this new world order is fragmented. This is true that there is a large swathe of countries remaining in the third tier, the middle, not choosing a side but practicing multi-alignment. They will join the US in some groupings or coalitions depending on the issue. But, also join China’s groupings and initiatives. For those countries, alignments are not easy.

The strong and powerful relationship of the middle group of states which choose to exercise their sovereignty, identity and agency and pursue multi-alignment. They have been in this in India, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. China will work with this multipolarity because this works in its favor. With multipolarity, China can more easily rise to its peer role of the US and make it influence felt on the international scene. The US has doubled down and successfully strengthened America’s alliances in Europe and Asia. It improved and created a number of mini-lateral as well as deepened bilateral defence cooperation with the Philippines. In addition to setting up the Quad, the Indo-Pacific Strategy and AUKUS, NATO-included the Asia-Pacific meeting two years in a row. The US 2022 Strategic Concept asserted that Indo-Pacific developments in the region:

- Impact on Euro-Atlantic security.
- Weakened the European Union High Representative for foreign policy, in a speech to the European Parliament in April 2023 said: “Europe is a security partner of the Asia-Pacific region”.
- AUKUS is jointly designed to stand as a geoeconomic and strategic partner to maintain security in the region.
- And the US, Japan, Australia and the Philippines agreed to establish defence cooperation in the South China Sea after a quadrilateral meeting this year on the margins of the Shangri-La Dialogue.

The US, Australia, and China are trying to court and win the hearts and minds of the minds of the US, Australia, and China are trying to court and win the hearts and minds to further remove attention and interest from the US, as how the Pacific islands and Irawood Africa will attract attention. Hence, the free world will increase from both.

The Washington Post recently reported that "India’s strategic location in the Indo-Pacific region is crucial to maintaining stability and security in the region. India’s military capabilities and strategic partnerships with major powers such as the United States, Australia, and Japan have become increasingly important in the face of rising geopolitical tensions. India’s role in regional forums such as the Quad and the AUKUS alliance underscores its commitment to upholding a rules-based international order and promoting regional security and stability."
Singapore must let its voice be heard

FROM BI

wrote a long investigative report on Lianhe Zaobao alleging the Chinese-language media was pushing China’s propaganda and falsehoods. The Post highlighted reports of China’s attempts to spread its messages and influence through working among Singapore Chinese clan associations and business associations.

“BLACK OPS” AND BATTLE OF NARRATIVES

Singapore is well aware of such activities, and the Government is constantly vigilant against agents of influence from all countries. We’ve had a history of uncovering “black ops” targeting our population seeking to manipulate sentiments. I always thought with media in Singapore, because of the language diversity of Singapore, the English-language daily The Straits Times would draw from English-language sources and the Chinese-language Zaobao would draw more from Chinese-language sources. This article appearing in the Post will most certainly be read by the US administration, members of Congress and their staff. There will be questions asked and there will be pressure on Singapore.

In fact, some American strategic thinkers are concerned that South-east Asia does not appear to be very concerned about the spread of Chinese propaganda and influence and are arguing for the US to counter Chinese propaganda and activities in the region. So we should be prepared for a stepped-up battle of narratives much more than currently evident.

What should we do?

STRATEGY FOR SINGAPORE

The best strategy for Singapore, a small state in these divisive and conflictual times, is to do what we have done in the past. We must realise that there are not so many options out there for Singapore. But we must do whatever we did better and refresh our approach and narrative.

1. As a small state, we must remain active and let our voice be heard, otherwise we can lose our relevance. Singapore must continue to speak up in global forums, bringing a calm and reasoned voice on what sort of world order we want. We must develop a good narrative. We used to say, “we do not want to choose”, but now we are stressing rightly that we are behaving in a way that serves our national interest and protects our sovereignty. Sometimes it may mean we have to say “no”.

2. Though we do not want to choose, in reality we make choices along the way with both sides. We take up initiatives on the table from the US and from China. That is fine. It does not mean we stop developing a strong relationship with the US or with China. We should do both for as long as we can. It is well-recognised that Singapore has a strategic and comprehensive relationship with the US. The US is our biggest investor and defence partner. We have expanded cooperation to sustainability, cyber security and now space. China is our largest trading partner, and China’s Belt and Road Initiative investments go through Singapore. Many of our major corporations as well as small- and medium-sized enterprises do business in China.

3. To be able to speak up and be relevant, we have to build up a strong, successful economy and society. No one during the Cold War would have listened to us if we were a basket case. No one now will listen to a basket case. So building a strong economy and society is important.

4. Finally a small state needs to work with groupings and Singapore has done that very well. In fact we helped to invent some of the groupings.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ASEAN

Singapore needs to strengthen Asean, our regional organisation. It is fashionable to trash Asean and point to Asean disunity as proof that it will not amount to much or do much. Regional groupings find it hard to reach consensus, and the larger the grouping, the tougher the going. The EU and Nato are not all of one view on how to deal with Russia. There is no consensus on whether or when to admit Ukraine into Nato. And there are different points of view on the use of cluster bombs.

It is interesting that in a 2023 survey on South-east Asia by iSEAS – Yusuf Ishak Institute, Asean was considered by Asean countries to be the second-most influential economic power in South-east Asia after China and ahead of the US, Japan or Europe. Asean also voted for Asean as the leading champion of the global trade agenda. In 2022, it voted for the US and China as No. 1 and 2 champions of the global trade agenda.

Asean believes in itself. If Asean continues to build itself into a more cohesive grouping, it has better odds to withstand the pressures from outside powers.

But Asean’s contribution to regional and global peace and security lies in the ability of some of its member states to create initiatives that are inclusive. It welcomes the participation of the US and China and even Russia. These are, for example, the Asean Regional Forum and the East Asian Summit. This is enormously important in these divisive times.

The Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is inclusive. Indonesia conducted the Komodo multilateral naval exercises as responses to humanitarian crises that included the US, China and Russia in June 2023 though the powers were on poor speaking terms.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation is one of the few regional organisations that includes both the US and China. Asean believes that China should be included, not marginalised from the regional order. A China excluded from regional groupings would be an unpredictable China.

Asean is the right convenor for the times. Singapore must be active as a player working with other Asean member states interested in preserving the peace, stability and prosperity of the region.

* This is an edited version of a speech by Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large and Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Design. Her speech was delivered at the Reinventing Destiny conference held on Aug 14, in commemoration of the 100th birth anniversary of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s founding prime minister.