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## **Singapore's Balancing Act Amidst US-China Indo-Pacific Competition: From Realism to Relationality**

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### **Abstract**

Amidst growing US-China Indo-Pacific Competition, Singapore stands out as a regional exception. Having constructive and deepening relations with both the US and China, Singapore has thus far been able to maintain strategic autonomy. Traditionally, most theorizing of Singaporean foreign policy has utilized Realist and, more recently, Liberal and English School approaches. While these approaches are helpful in explaining Singaporean multilateralism and hedging strategies, they remain amorphous regarding how Singapore, a small nation, can operationalize these preferences. This essay will argue that Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory can adequately explain how Singapore can maintain foreign policy independence amidst great power competition.

**Keywords:** Singapore, Southeast Asia, US-China Competition, Chinese IR Theory, Relational Theory, International Security



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## 1. Introduction

Singapore is not a large nation. Lying at a strategic node of global trade, Singapore acts as a gateway to the South China Sea, connecting multiple regional trading routes into a truly global one. Indeed, Singapore's strategic location and pragmatic development model have seen the nation grow into a wealthy city state, with significant military and economic power (Lee 2024). However, Singapore's early history was characterized by deeply entrenched vulnerability. In the 1940s, Singapore was violently conquered by the Japanese. In the following decades, ethnic violence, unexpected independence, territorial disputes, and regional communist movements posed existential threats to the nascent state (Leifer 2000). Thus, Singapore was forced to adopt a highly pragmatic foreign policy, combining diplomatic and internal strength to secure survival through sustaining regional stability (ibid).

In the contemporary era of US-China competition, Singapore proves to be an exception compared to regional players like Japan, Thailand, and the Philippines. Notably, Singapore has been able to secure strong relations with both the US and China, with bilateral ties bridging the great power rivalry. Singapore is economically integrated and cooperates heavily on mutual security concerns with both countries (MOFA Singapore 2024; Pang 2007; Zha 2022). Interestingly, US-Singaporean and Sino-Singaporean cooperation continues to deepen, even as tensions between the US and China grow (Marston 2023; SCMP 2024).

Traditional theorization of Singaporean foreign policy applies Realist small-state frameworks to understand Singapore's grand strategy as 'hedging', defined in the literature as "a set of mutually counteracting policy initiatives that signal ambiguity to competing powers... to preserve strategic ambiguity" (Marston 2023:30). However, more recent contributions have used Liberal theoretical frameworks to explain Singapore's multilateral inclinations, and English School (ES) perspectives to supplement Realist explanations of Singaporean balancing. This essay will argue that although Singapore's contemporary foreign policy continues to follow hedging tendencies, the operationalization of Singaporean strategies and enduring foreign policy independence amidst growing US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific can be explained by Qin Yaqing (2016; 2018a)'s "Relational Theory", which analyses how intersubjective relations constitute

power and define cooperation. “Intersubjective relations” comprises relations between states, but also between states and their domestic and international contexts (ibid). These relations are “intersubjective” in that international and domestic contexts are continuously shaped by shared understandings and constructions by states, individuals, and organizations (ibid).

Emerging as an indigenous Chinese intellectual movement following the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s rapprochement with the West, Chinese approaches to IR Theory attempt to reconcile China’s unique historical understandings with the characteristics of the international system (Zhang and Chang 2016; Kim 2016). One of the key thinkers of this movement, Qin Yaqing (2016, 2018a), developed a theory based on Confucian dialectical traditions, focusing specifically on the nature of interstate relations. Much of the engagement surrounding Relational Theory focuses predominantly on its cultural foundations (Guzzini 2024; Kavalski 2023; Kavalski 2018; Ho 2019; Babones 2017; Qin 2024). This essay seeks to add empirical applications of Qin’s theory, by utilizing relational frameworks to explain Singapore’s ability to balance relations with both China and the US.

The following sections will examine individual theoretical approaches to Singaporean foreign policy. First, we will explore Realist and Liberal critiques to explain Singaporean balancing and hedging tendencies. Singaporean hedging seems to have persisted into the current era of great power competition. However, Realist explanations around how Singapore can maintain foreign policy independence remain amorphous, while Liberalism is insufficient to explain unilateral policies which protect Singaporean security and survival in an institutionally interwoven region like the Indo-Pacific. Next, we will look towards English School (ES) thinking. ES perspectives are useful to integrate multilateralism and identity into Singapore’s balancing strategy, while explaining how hedging is attractive to Singaporean policymakers. However, ES theorization too is limited, as it is unclear how identity and image can exactly be operationalized to secure large-scale foreign policy objectives. Consequently, we use Qin’s Relational Theory to better explain how Singapore’s unique identity, history, and relations are mobilized to secure balancing objectives.

Here, an important caveat should be noted. We understand that core assumptions surrounding agency and object of analysis differ significantly between, Realism, Liberalism, the English School, and Relational Theory. We also recognize that relationality in IR is a relatively recent conceptual development. Thus, the authors are not trying to epistemologically synthesize each approach, nor build a defense of Relational Theory. The goal is to use concepts of each theory to build a case-specific understanding of Singaporean balancing, in the context of US-China tensions materializing in the Indo-Pacific.

## **2. Beyond Realism**

### **2.1 Realism Defined**

Realism views human nature as self-preserving, egocentric, and tribal. Built on the principles of Westphalian sovereign equality and territorial sovereignty, the state represents the highest unit of political organization, implying a form of international anarchy in which no supreme body governs interstate relations. As states cannot rely on other states or international institutions for assistance, they must engage in “self-help” (Morgenthau 1950; Frankel 1996; Chong 2006). To Realists, power is commonly defined as a state’s capacity to realize their preferences (ibid). Realists pinpoint the components of national power in a narrow material focus, such as military, economic, and political capabilities (Waltz 1979). Social institutions, such as the Hobbesian social contract, uphold state power and legitimacy, while relative power is key, and the type of power a state exercises is situational (ibid; Barkin 2010).

The resulting inherently suspicious nature of states creates balancing incentives (Morgenthau 1950; Waltz 1979). If one state tries to empower itself, others will either align with each other or empower themselves to balance out the rising actor (ibid). The combination of alignment (external balancing) and self-strengthening (internal balancing) creates a balance of power, regional or global, in which states prevent other states from becoming too powerful (Waltz 1979). Balance of power theory does not assume states align completely with others, as such alignment can strengthen alliance partners as well and further compound existing insecurities

(ibid). Thus, alignment must be balanced with cooperation with less friendly states and self-strengthening to maintain a desired relative power distribution (ibid). Indeed, for more powerful states, there are decreased incentives to align for balance (Parent and Rosato 2015). Because they are suspicious of other great powers and have more capabilities to self-strengthen, these states tend to prefer internal balancing rather than external balancing (ibid). In contrast to balancing, Realists also highlight the phenomenon of band-wagoning, involving strong alignment with a power enjoying significant material capabilities (Cladi 2022). This strategy is popular with smaller states who, because of less self-strengthening capabilities, need to rely on larger states for security against more powerful regional threats (ibid). Balancing and bandwagoning are crucial to understand earlier theorizing of Singaporean foreign policy.

Hedging strategies represent a middle ground between balancing and bandwagoning and occur when states are unwilling to choose between the two (Goh 2005a). To uphold a balance between balancing and band-wagoning, states pursue contradictory policies to maintain cooperation and adequate distance with great powers (ibid). In the context of US-China competition in Southeast Asia, Goh (2005a: 3-4) argues that regional states pursue three overlapping and contradictory strategies of hedging. First, they engage in “soft balancing” in which they persuade the US to involve itself regionally, to balance growing Chinese influence (ibid). Second, they pursue complex engagement with China to convince it to engage constructively in multilateral institutions and international norms, with the expressed goal of mediating perceived Chinese aggressive tendencies (ibid). Lastly, to hedge against both regional US and Chinese hegemony, these states integrate themselves regionally to increase their independence and leverage collective capabilities (ibid). Thus, hedging is inherently contradictory. States maintain close but distant relations with each other to maintain autonomy. Southeast Asian states cooperate closely with both the US and China, relying on relations with each to balance relations with the other.

It is important to note that Waltz (1979)’s Structural Realism is not explicitly a theory of foreign policy analysis. Neoclassical Realism synthesizes Structural Realism with domestic factors to create a coherent foreign policy theory (Taliaferro et al. 2009). As in Structural Realism, Neoclassical Realism, from a statist framework which defines states as represented by the

national security executive, argues that states are driven first and foremost by stimuli from the anarchic international system (ibid). Uniquely, Neoclassical Realism includes domestic institutions and structures in its analysis of the drivers of foreign policy decisions, differing from Structural Realism's treatment of the state as the most important unitary actor. State leaders make decisions regarding their assessment of the international system first (ibid). However, the ability of state leadership to mobilize domestic resources will subsequently constrain which foreign policy actions are feasible (ibid; Marston 2023).

## 2.2 Neoclassical Realist Themes in Singaporean Foreign Policy

With limited natural resources and a large, ethnically diverse population, an independent Singaporean state was assumed to be untenable during decolonization (Leifer 2000). Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 was unanticipated, representing an immensely traumatic and consequential experience for Singapore's early political elite (Seng 1998). Independence occurred during a period of large-scale ethnic tensions between Malay and Chinese populations, which was exacerbated by a violent military conflict with Indonesia in the 1966 Konfrontasi. Sudden independence, combined with a reliance on Indonesia and Malaysia to maintain access to resources and its geostrategic position as a maritime gateway to the South China Sea, created a deep-seated feeling of vulnerability. Independence, thus, had to be vigorously and actively maintained as a process that continued past August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1965 (Leifer 2000).

This process of independence, along with the philosophies of Singapore's early foreign policy elite, has led much research to theorize Singaporean foreign policy within Realist frameworks (Chan 1971; Ganesan 2006; Leifer 2000; Wilairat 1975; Buszynski 1985; Singh 1999). These studies have served to homogenize the state; given the dominance of the People's Action Party over Singaporean politics, this statist homogenization of Singaporean foreign policy analysis is not surprising (Mauzy and Milne 2002). A Neoclassical Realist perspective sees the state command a high degree of power to mobilize domestic resources, demonstrating executive independence in decision-making and heightening the ability to respond exclusively to

international systemic stimuli (ibid; Marston 2023). The general arguments exhibited in these studies view Singapore, at least until the end of the Cold War, as exhibiting classic Realist small-state strategies of band-wagoning and balancing great powers. For example, during the Cold War, Singapore cooperated closely with the US to balance against Sino-Soviet influence in Asia (Tan 2016). This is viewed as a strategy of state-survival, using pragmatic diplomacy and economic tools to defend against immediate security concerns, i.e. resource dependence on neighboring states, territorial challenges from Malaysia and Indonesia, and “destabilizing” regional communist threats. Moreover, these early challenges inform the general focus on upholding sovereign equality and territoriality (Chong 2006). Pushing for sovereign equality internationally, such as Singaporean opposition in the UN to the 1978 Vietnamese intervention in Kampuchea, was viewed as a key normative commitment to state survival (ibid). Championing non-intervention is thus viewed as a way of decreasing threats to Singaporean territorial integrity, from larger states like Indonesia (ibid).

### 2.3 The Liberal Critique

Following the end of the Cold War, Liberal theorizing of Singaporean foreign policy emerged. Since the 1980s, Singapore has developed into a global-city, heavily reliant on international trade and open economic access (Chong 1998). Margolin (1998) argues that Singapore’s post-Cold War foreign policy has moved from being reactive and cynical to more cosmopolitan and multilateral, consistent with a Liberal slant. Similarly, Dent (2002) characterized Singapore’s foreign economic policy (FEP) as dependent upon multilateral cooperation and regional development through the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the ASEAN Free Trade Area. Recently, Loh (2023) posited Singapore’s foreign policy as focused on preserving the Liberal International Order (LIO) through defending international law, the UN Charter, and promoting economic liberalization.

However, while Liberal theorization is compelling in explaining Singapore's multilateral policy positions, its interaction with Singapore's ingrained balancing tendencies is somewhat vague. Since the 1970s, Singapore has engaged in rapid economic development of value-added industries, such as precision manufacturing and technology, to build on the strategic location of its port (Yeo 2016). Combined with American security cooperation, Singapore utilizes technology as a "threat multiplier", increasing the relative power of its military as a deterrent to security risks (Huxley 2005). Moreover, Singapore's development as a global trading hub was aimed at increasing its economic power to better balance regional powers and reduce resource dependency on Malaysia (ibid). Singapore appeared responsive to changes in the international system, exhibiting self-help and balancing mentalities under Realist frameworks. This does not necessarily 'disprove' Liberal theorizing but implies that Singapore's new Liberal tendencies must be reconciled with ingrained Realist attitudes, suggesting Singapore should be considered an "abridged Realist", supplementing balancing tendencies with multilateral foreign policy mechanisms (Chong 2006).

#### 2.4 Between Balancing and Multilateralism

As a "global city" and international financial hub, Ting (2010) argues that Singapore has strong incentives to preserve the Southeast Asian and Indo-Pacific balance of power. As a trade-dependent economy, Singapore's prosperity hinges upon the stability of multilateral trade networks (ibid).

To Singapore's foreign policy elites, alliances and stability are to never be presumed. This necessitates pragmatic long-term planning based on international developments (Wah 2005). Indeed, speaking on expanding Soviet influence in Southeast Asia at the Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting (October 1981), Lee Kuan Yew (cited in Wah 2005: 199) claimed "In an imperfect world, we have to search for the best accommodation possible. And no accommodation is permanent."

In the current era of US-China Indo-Pacific competition, Singapore has engaged in great power hedging by leveraging US military technology and joint military exercises (JMEs) with US allies, while simultaneously seeking improved trade ties with China (Marston 2023; Zha 2022). Chinese influence is seen as a potential long-term threat to sovereignty by Singapore's political elite and domestic public (Marston 2023). While Singapore tries to hedge great powers, it also uses "equidistant diplomacy", not being explicitly pro-US or pro-China to maintain strong connections to both, demonstrating clear self-help tendencies through competing contradictory dyadic strategies (Teo and Koga 2021). As a component of its hedging strategy, this does not come without challenges. Singapore has had tense relations with China, following JMEs with Taiwan and closer relations with the US on security cooperation, viewing their Indo-Pacific presence as crucial to regional security and stability. This has led to Chinese restrictions on Singaporean business, exerting pressure through organizations like the Singapore Business Federation to make it harder for businesses to obtain contracts and permits in Chinese markets like real estate, where Singaporeans hold considerable investments (Panda 2020; Lee 2024). Despite these challenges, Sino-Singaporean relations remain remarkably close, evidenced by the 2019 enhanced bilateral Agreement on Defense Exchanges and Security Cooperation (ADESC), and the increased trend of Chinese greenfield investment in Singapore, which saw US\$4.54bn worth of FDI pour into the city-state (Rhodium Group 2024; The Financial Times 2024b).

Critiques of early realist conceptualizations of Singaporean foreign policy have continued to vouch for its resemblance to Realist balancing theory. Chong (1998) argues that Singaporean foreign policy can no longer be accurately analyzed through a Realist small-state balancing lens, as it looks increasingly towards multilateralism and takes a more active role in advocating for international institutions to manage tensions. In support of this argument, Loh (2023) views Singapore as able to engage uniquely within the LIO through 'order-modifying behavior', by contesting the universality of liberal democracy in international organizations, through vehemently defending the death penalty for drug trafficking at the UN Human Rights Council in 2014 and 2016 and, at the 2022 UN General Assembly, defending widespread inclusion in the international order; regardless of human rights and democracy. Chong and Loh both see Singapore as able to challenge and drive existing international values debates simultaneously.

Similarly, Hwee (2017) and Grzywacz (2019) argue that Realist theorization is insufficient to explain Singaporean foreign policy. Singapore seems to be more proactive, albeit within small state structural limitations, which allows for independent foreign policy paths (ibid). Singapore is not only reacting to international stimuli, as realists would argue small states must do, but rather driving its own ideational and normative visions to shape the international system. These studies are compelling in problematizing exclusive balancing and band-wagoning conceptions of Singaporean foreign policy by demonstrating willingness to act independently in international forums, sometimes in direct opposition to American-sponsored liberal internationalism. However, the scope is relatively limited. Yes, Singapore can independently drive policy on the international stage; however, it does not necessarily mean that Singapore does not balance - only that it balances in specific, sometimes contradictory, spheres. This seemingly suggests Singapore's strategy is closer to hedging. Singaporean foreign policy is obviously complicated and contextually adaptive, but conclusions can be drawn about the strong self-help mentality motivating its foreign policy, leveraging great powers in securing its interests.

While Realist conceptions are compelling at explaining Singaporean foreign policy preferences, it remains mono-faceted in explaining the tools by which Singapore can effectively hedge while enjoying independent foreign policy decision making. Traditionally, studies have highlighted Singapore's disproportionate military and economic power and, more recently, the use of soft power, consistent with Nye (1990)'s illustration of soft power as an attractive, rather than a compellent force, to drive state behavior. However, compared to regional powers, Singapore's military is relatively small, albeit well equipped. Despite its strength, its economy does not enjoy regional supremacy (IMF 2024). Military and economic power are undoubtedly important in the balance of power; however, Singapore's global connections and position as a cosmopolitan hub, and prestige suggest a more nuanced source of power.

### **3. The English School**

To the English School (ES), the international system is anarchic but ordered. Thus, international societies can form glued together by common ideals, missions, and goals (Buzan 2001; Bull 1977). Accordingly, the rules of international society are established through agreements

between member-states, who recognize common benefits to adhering to such agreements (Bull and Watson 2000). Thus, the legitimacy of an international order is based on acceptance and participation by all relevant actors. A notable contemporary example of an ES-style sub-global international society, bound by shared rules, values, and norms, would be the European Union (Buzan 2014). Moreover, because international society is governed by rules amidst the absence of a formal hierarchical power, ES thinking implies states bear equal responsibility for upholding its rules (Ting 2010).

The balance of power is also central to the ES conceptualization of order. A stable balance of power allows states to retaliate against those who violate the rules (Bull 1977). A state approaching total hegemony sees it capable of exerting disproportionate influence on its neighbors, causing weaker states' prioritization of survival over adherence to normatively shared rules of the system. Bull (1977)'s conception of the balance of power distinguishes between local and general balances of power. Local balances extend to a particular neighborhood of states, while general balances extend beyond a particular neighborhood. Unlike Realism, the balance of power is not an abstract given; it is something states need to maintain. The balance of power is more an "institution" of the international system which states, through historically constructed and evolving practices, must deliberately uphold (Alderson and Hurrell 2000). This conceptualization distinguishes itself from Waltz (1979)'s balance of power conception by presenting such balances not as a mechanical corrective force in the international system resulting from rationalist state decisions, but rather deliberate action, built on ideas of sovereign equality and equal responsibility in maintaining international order (ibid). Therefore, this gives states the agency to determine the nature of the international system, as their actions and other states' perceptions of said actions determine the relative distributions of power that subsequently manifest (Bull 1977).

The literature theorizing Singaporean foreign policy through an ES lens is very limited. Michael Leifer (1986;1987) has studied efforts of Southeast Asian states to create a stable regional order through regional dialogues and value creation. Only the Singapore-specific work by Ting (2009a, 2009b, 2010) effectively lays the foundation for ES Singaporean foreign policy perspectives.

Ting (2010) relies heavily on conceptions of Singapore's identity and image. Wendt (1999: 224) defines identity as a "unit level quality, rooted in an actor's self-understandings" which "generates motivational and behavioral dispositions". State identities are formed firstly at the domestic level through a state's self-understandings but can also be shaped by the international system (ibid). "Role identities" are shaped through relations with other states (ibid: 227). For example, a state is only a colonial state if it has colonies, suggesting that state identity is shaped through a colonial power's relations with its colonies. Image is predominantly defined externally, representing how a state is viewed by other states (Hermann et al. 1997). Foreign policy decisions are intrinsically based on images of foreign states, ie. ally, enemy, colony, etc. (ibid). States can shape their image through state action and foreign policy, thus also shaping how other states choose to engage (George 1969). For states to project a national image, it must first be constructed domestically and then be projected internationally, which implies that national identity is inseparable from national image (ibid).

Ting (2010) argues that international image is key to foreign policy formation. Singapore has an identity and image as a trading state. When extrapolated to foreign policy, demonstrations of predictability are key for economic survival, international relevance, and maintenance of its image. This predictability allows states to sidestep friction from mistrust or uncertainty when dealing with Singapore (Bull and Watson 2000; Ting 2010). Thus, image is key for Singapore's strategy, allowing for the maintenance of relations with competing states within the international order (ibid). On an international level, Singapore views regional order via a stable balance of power as crucial to sustaining a positive trade environment. For Singapore, order is the goal of regional policy which is made "sustainable through increasing the number of poles," suggesting a multilateral preference (ibid: 70). The implication is that for Singapore, relative power can be increased through multipolar systems. Importantly, Ting argues that Singapore's balancing strategy extends beyond Realist notions by expanding balancing away from military realms towards multilateralism. Moreover, in 1984, Lee Hsien Loong (cited in Ting 2010: 72) suggested that Singapore's hedging strategy relies on linking Singapore to the multiple competing interests of great external powers in the region, so no one power becomes too overbearing. Goh (2005b)

conceptualized such a strategy of integrating great powers into regional affairs as “omni-enmeshment”. The overarching goal of such strategies is to tie external powers to regional security and economic interests, by which one can subsequently create external interest in maintaining regional stability (ibid).

For Ting (2009, 2010), Singapore’s relations with regional states reflect two key aspects of ES theorizing: maintaining the balance of power and international order. Firstly, Singapore has historically sought close ties with China and India to prevent either Malaysia or Indonesia from becoming too dominant. In the case of China, Singapore sees great benefits to economic cooperation; however, there are inherent risks of oversized Chinese and US relations in ASEAN. To hedge against this risk, Singapore has looked to strengthen ties with India, elevating their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024. Secondly, disputes with Malaysia are usually resolved through international mechanisms such as the ICJ, which suggests a more ordered ES approach. An example is Singapore's active use of the ICJ to resolve the 2008 Pedra Branca territorial dispute with Malaysia (Lathrop 2008).

Overall, the ES and realist theorizing overlap in their understanding of Singapore as a balancing state. However, ES theorizing, focusing on Singapore’s leverage with its transparent national image, adds specificity by examining how regional balances of power are maintained. While realists also focus on balance of power maintenance, ES’s operationalization mechanism shifts focus from hard power to more ideational components. The ES’s focus on image is crucial, because it explains the mechanisms by which Singapore can build diplomatic capital and uphold stable membership in international society with neighbors and great powers. Material forms of power are still relevant under the ES framework; however, image and identity are also mobilized to account for preferences and behaviors within international society. ES theorizing, however, is still amorphous regarding how national image can be mobilized to achieve such goals. Indeed, it is unclear why image is sufficient to drive great powers and regional states into cooperation, rather than coercive conflict with Singapore. Accordingly, a more specific analysis of power is necessary.

#### 4. Relational Theory

This next section will look at Qin's "Relational Theory" to explain Singapore's unique ability to operationalize its hedging strategy amid US-China competition. Specifically, the conception of relational power explains Singapore's ability to effectively manage ties with the US and China. Singapore's unique diplomatic history and cultural identity is key to stable and growing independent bilateral relations with both nations.

##### 4.1 Relationality

Building off Confucian understandings of societal relations, Qin (2016, 2018a)'s Relational Theory is built off three assumptions. Firstly, international politics is not based on discrete and separate entities, but on interconnected sets of relations. These relations are fluid and the most significant feature of global politics (ibid). Secondly, Wendt (1992: 397-398)'s Constructivism argues that "identities are inherently relational". State identity and roles are constructed through interactions and intersubjective understandings, constituting a social understanding of the international system. State action is derived from shared understandings of identity (ibid). Like Wendt, Qin (2016, 2018a) views states as "actors-in-relations", where identities are constructed and reproduced through interstate relations. However, it is important to note Qin's clear theoretical distinction from Wendtian constructivism with an inherently non-Western foundation, recognising international politics as a consistently evolving set of relations that does not presume the existence of actors before relationships. Relationality maintains an indigenously cultural foundation of Confucian dialectics, where actors can transcend the physical manifestations of leadership and publics to include cultural and historical environments (Qin 2016). Uniquely, Qin views changes to state identity as resulting from changes in relations, rather than from changes within states themselves (ibid). Finally, relations between states are not static but a continually ongoing process. Actors are constantly producing and reproducing their identities through relations. Qin (2009, 2016: 37) defines this as a "process", an example of which is cooperation in

which there is “co-changing and co-evolution through maintaining, managing, and harmonizing relations among actors”.

Under this assumption, relations between states would look like an interconnected ‘web of ropes’, with nodes at each individual state reaching out to each other state. Some ropes might be thicker or thinner, representing the proximity of relations. Bilateral relations are thus the interactions between two bundles of rope. If identities too are relationally constructed, interstate relations are how one state’s complex set of relations interact with another’s.

Qin (2016, 2018a)’s “Relational Theory” thus argues that states make decisions based on the degree of intimacy of these relations with other actors. Actors are embedded in a series of relational circles, which work to constrain state action (ibid). An example of these relations is international norms. International norms and institutions cannot be created by individual actors but must be created and understood through interstate relations (ibid).

#### 4.2 Relational Power and Cooperation

If relations are the key constitutive factor of international politics, relational power is that which is created and managed through interstate relations (Qin 2016). Like hard or soft power, relational power concerns the ability to shape an actor’s motivations and behaviors (ibid; Dahl 1957). Where relational power differs from mainstream conceptions of power is the focus on such power being shared, because relations are fundamentally communal. Relational power is also increasing (power increases by use) and co-empowering (power can be used to grow all actors in an exercise of power) (Qin 2018a). More powerful actors are better able to manage and expand their relational circles (Qin 2016). An example of relational power is ASEAN - on their own, ASEAN nations have relatively little material power resources. However, as a bloc, they lead East Asian regionalism and effectively manage great power relations between the US and China (Qin 2018a). The explanation is that ASEAN’s power comes from relations, ie. intra-bloc

partnerships that co-empower states, allowing them to wield outsized international influence (ibid).

In the case of Singapore, its relations and leadership in bodies like ASEAN and US-China balancing strategies should theoretically be impossible, given Singapore's relatively small material power and tendency for such materially weak states to be absorbed into the spheres of larger states (Wah 2005; Tan 2016). The implication is that Singapore has been effectively able to manage relations, allowing for the acquisition of more relational power which thus explains its outsized global influence. This conception of Singaporean power synthesizes well with conceptions of identity and image. Singapore can manage partnerships through overtly presenting itself as a stable, transparent, and predictable trading state, but also utilize these partnerships to empower itself and aid management of other relations (Ting 2011; Qin 2018a). Indeed, relational power explains how Singaporean identity is operationalized and the mechanisms in which it can be used to achieve stable balances of power.

Qin (2018a) also conceptualizes interstate cooperation as determined by how close states are relationally. Cooperation is also based on reciprocity, in which interest is shared and achieved together. One state's interest is maximized only if the other's is too. "Mencius optimality" holds that harmony is the best environment to realize common and individual interests (ibid). However, this conception of cooperation is complicated by the "kinsperson's dilemma," or the idea that cooperation with one actor usually means decreased cooperation with another. The way this is usually conceptualized is the choice to save one of two brothers; while an individual has relational commitments to both brothers, under Confucian values, saving one condemns the other. This implies that relations can be conflicting and require shrewd management. For international cooperation, the choice surrounding which actor to cooperate with is usually difficult but is made easier by the degree of intimacy one actor shares with another. For example, during the Cold War, Eastern European states had an easier time cooperating with the USSR versus the US because of a higher degree of relative intimacy with Soviet leadership, driven by cultural, historical, and ideological affinities (ibid). Additionally, the kinsperson's dilemma is not zero sum; relations can still be effectively managed to realize interests, albeit sometimes not fully

optimal (ibid). Qin (2018a)'s conception of relational cooperation does not function independent of other mainstream theoretical IR approaches. Intimacy remains openly defined, allowing Realist, Liberal, and ES approaches to determine what makes relations intimate - whether it is material interests, values, or commitments to international order. Relational cooperation disputes the universality of conflictual conceptions of interstate relations, adding a layer of analysis beyond interest construction to interest operationalization. It thus looks towards how relations should be managed to achieve optimal outcomes for all parties.

For Singapore, the degree of intimacy with both the US and China, along with relational power, allows it to maintain independent and balanced foreign policy in an environment of US-China great power competition.

#### 4.3 Singapore's Relational Balancing Act

As a general observation, Asian nations have trouble navigating the growing US-China rivalry. Japan, while cooperating heavily with the US and hosting key American military bases, has increasingly viewed China as the biggest regional security threat (CFR 2008; Maizland and Cheng 2021). Indeed, Japan's legacy of imperialism and post-War alignment with the US has shaped antagonistic Chinese responses (Seong-ho 2017; AP 2023; AP 2024). Japan has been unable to seek large-scale cooperation with China, particularly because of close ties with American regional policy (Reuters 2024). Despite recognising it as a major security threat since the early 2000s, the Japanese stance remains one committed to "having dialogues and cooperate on matters of common interest with China" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2022). Similarly, South Korea, another strong US ally, despite having past cooperative relations with China, angered the PRC after acquiring US THAAD missile systems in 2016 and threatened to enhance US-allied regional A2/AD capabilities (CFR 2024; Chung 2012; Garcia-Herrero 2024). The Philippines, after extending its mutual defense treaty with the US in 2024, has continued to engage in increasingly tense maritime conflicts with China in the South China Sea (CFR 2024). Meanwhile, Thailand, which has enjoyed historically strong relations with the US, has been

unwilling to deepen relations amid fears of losing ties with China (Chivvis et al. 2023). For these American allies, cooperation with the US has usually come at the expense of relations with China, demonstrating Qin (2018a)'s kinsperson's dilemma.

In this context, Singapore has proved to be a regional exception when compared to American regional allies and non-allies such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Despite not designated a formal or major non-NATO ally, defense cooperation with the US has remained robust, while China has continued to be Singapore's largest trading partner and destination of foreign investment since 2013 (MOFA Singapore 2024). On the defense front, despite sometimes bumpy relations, China and Singapore collaborate rather closely via JMEs and equipment transfers, training, and information sharing (SCMP 2024; Zha 2022; Tan 2016). With the US, Singapore has signed a historic free trade agreement which has seen American investment make up the majority of Singaporean-bound FDI (Pang 2007; Lee 2024; Tan 2016). On the military front, Singapore cooperates with the US by hosting a large airbase in Changi, participating in JMEs, and engaging in arms sales with the US and its allies (Zha 2022). Despite this, strong relations with the US have not irreversibly damaged relations with China. Sino-Singaporean cooperation seems to only be deepening following a new round of JMEs in 2024 and increased Chinese greenfield investment since 2018 (Wei 2024; SCMP 2024; Rhodium Group 2024; The Financial Times 2024b). Alongside this, Singapore has sought closer military ties with the US through F-35 fighter purchases (The Financial Times 2024a).

Singapore has a long and constructive diplomatic history with China. Since the 1960s, Singapore has traded extensively with China and hosted one of the first foreign branches of the Bank of China (Er 2021). In 1971, Singapore supported the CCP's recognition as the legitimate government of China in the UN and efforts against Soviet-supported Vietnam (ibid). The Chinese and Singaporean leaders, Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew, shared a strong relationship, largely owing to Singapore's identity as a small but highly developed Asian nation (Fook 2018). This Singaporean identity, along with China's new developmental project, created ideological unity that fostered friendly relations (ibid). Indeed, Singapore, because of its strong links with post-Mao China, remains one of the most important countries to China's development

(Bo 2023). Additionally, being the only majority ethnic Chinese state outside of China, the two nations have been labelled as having a “special relationship” by Singaporean leaders (Er 2021). Moreover, Bo (2023) argues that cooperation with China is largely driven by mutual trust, involvement in similar initiatives, and shared interests suggesting strong ideational and identitarian components of cooperation.

Similarly, with the US, Singapore shares a long history of defense and economic cooperation evidenced by the Singapore-US FTA, Cold War-era cooperation, and continued close relations (Tan 2016; Zha 2022). For Singapore, Cold War alignment with the US was key to maintain internal order against communist threats emanating from Malayan insurgents (ibid). However, after the end of the Cold War, security cooperation grew, as new and unpredictable threats of terrorism and piracy emerged (ibid). Singapore has also rhetorically supported US Freedom of Navigation missions in the South China Sea, demonstrating Singaporean commitments to stable trade and sovereign equality (The White House Press Office 2022). However, security relations have sometimes been rocky. During the Cold War, Singapore condemned US intervention in Vietnam, seeking stable relations with the USSR and a stable Southeast Asian regional order to hedge US influence (Leifer 1986, 1987). Economically, the US-Singapore FTA was a response to failed Singaporean trade negotiations with ASEAN nations (Tan 2016). The failure of negotiations demonstrated inherent unpredictability, as well as a temporary failure of multilateralism and regionalism within ASEAN trade politics, necessitating stronger economic ties with the US to hedge against this volatility. Singapore could then rely more on shipping to the US and bilateral FDI flows. Thus, cooperation with the US has historically been key in helping Singapore balance regional security and economic threats. Cooperation with the US is also a result of Singapore’s close alignment with the US-led rules-based LIO especially in the aftermath of the Cold War, despite some disagreements on specific human rights issues and interventionism (Bo 2023). Emblematic of Singapore’s historically strong relations with the US, Lee Kuan Yew was one of the first Southeast Asian leaders to address a joint session of the US Congress in October 1985, lambasting trade protectionism and presenting US involvement in Asia as key to prosperity (Lee 1985). American-Singaporean cooperation, like Sino-Singaporean relations, is built on shared trust, interests, and values.

In terms of relational cooperation, Singapore shares close relations and constructive diplomatic histories with both the US and China. Based on Qin (2018a)'s framework, because of the intimacy of Singapore's relations with both powers, close cooperation is theoretically feasible. Based on the evidence presented, it could be argued that past cooperation, not relational cooperation, predicts future cooperation. However, these trends only apply when analyzing dyadic cooperation. When viewing Sino-Singaporean and US-Singapore cooperation together, there seems to be more opportunities for Sino-Singaporean cooperation to threaten American-Singaporean cooperation. For example, strong Sino-Singaporean defense ties could threaten American-Singaporean arms sales, because of American fears of Chinese access to US military technology. Thus, past cooperation predicting future cooperation is not an adequate mechanism to explain growing ties between Singapore and both the US and China suggesting management of competing relations under the framework of relational cooperation is more analytically robust. Compared to other American-aligned Asian states such as Japan, who share violent histories with China, historic Sino-Singaporean relations have been predominantly constructive. However, the question of how Singapore can overcome the kinsperson's dilemma remains. While Singapore has strong military ties with both the US and China, the US is, by far, Singapore's most important military partner. This is to the point where China does not view it as an impetus to military cooperation, because out-matching US contributions is unfeasible (Bo 2023). Furthermore, due to Singapore's "equidistant diplomacy" and avowed openness to military cooperation with China as evidenced by the 2019 Singapore China Defense Cooperation Agreement, the PRC seems more willing to cooperate with Singapore militarily, despite its ties to the US (ibid; Teo and Koga 2021).

Overall, China, due to close relations with the Singaporean state, has maintained an understanding approach to Singapore's reliance on America to preserve its multi-ethnic society amidst one of the most diverse regions in the world (ibid). Indeed, the Chinese leadership recognizes that regional threats from Malaysia and Indonesia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century made defense reliance on other Southeast Asian nations and itself unfeasible, requiring strong extra-regional ties with the US to hedge local threats and volatilities (Kao, 2022). Singapore's unique

geopolitical profile sees it granted a deference on the part of Beijing not afforded to other regional actors, because of its vulnerable location at the heart of the Malacca Strait and shallow natural defense and material capabilities. This has reassured regional players that Singapore's deepening multilateral defense involvement, all the while without involvement in ASEAN mechanisms or defense treaties that see it directly aligned against either the US or China, reaffirm that its main motivations are to develop deterrence for national survival. It additionally helps that Singapore harbors no territorial disputes with China, unlike many other ASEAN states. Sino-Singaporean security dialogue has remained consistent through recurring high-level exchanges such as the annual Shangri-La Dialogue and the Xiangshan Forum, helping maintain mutual trust while decreasing fears of unreasonably close US alignment (ibid). Economically, Singapore has immensely strong relations with both countries, where trade and investment with both remain vital (Bo, 2023). Both the US and China also have strong economic interests in Singapore, but have not shown any desire to force Singapore to choose a side economically (Lin et al. 2020). Qin (2016, 2018a) argues that strong management of relations is key to transcend the kinsperson's dilemma. Singapore has been able to find important niches, aided by ideational alignments, which allow US and Chinese interests not to conflict too much, allowing it to effectively hedge both powers.

Singapore also has relational power. As an energy and trade transportation hub, and its role leading security initiatives in the Strait of Malacca, Singapore has placed itself uniquely at the center of the global economy (Casey and Sussex 2012). The Strait of Malacca is crucial to the global economy, representing a key global trading route and oil pipeline from the Middle East to Asian economic superpowers (ibid). Through this position, Singapore can leverage global connections to increase its own power. This is not just power Singapore only owns. Singapore receives economic boosts through business at its port, and status boosts through this position, while other states also receive trade security; demonstrating Confucian beliefs in the win-win nature of communal relations. Singapore's global connections mutually strengthen Singapore and those traversing its port and the Strait of Malacca. This seems representative of Qin (2018a)'s conception of relational power. Power Singapore generates from its position as a trade hub is contingent on both Singapore's responsibility to security, and other states' willingness to continue using Singapore's port. Thus, Singaporean trade power is fundamentally relational,

dependent on international trade, and shared, contingent on the willingness of states to uphold current trade routes.

Singapore strategically utilized this position as a global hub for economic development, gaining more powerful foreign policy tools through growing status and economic prominence (Wah 2005). Representative of this enhanced importance is China's increased greenfield investment in Singapore, which is primarily driven by Singapore's position as a trade hub, allowing Chinese companies to access foreign markets with lower barriers, and Singaporean transparency, reducing reputational costs for Chinese firms (Rhodium Group 2024; The Financial Times 2024a). Through these trends, Singapore receives more economic influence through investment by new, larger Chinese firms. Importantly, this influence is still fundamentally communal, contingent on both Chinese willingness to allow firms to re-domicile and Singaporean maintenance of its position within the global economy (ibid). Singapore could then use these tools to deepen multilateral partnerships, regional and international alike, while taking a larger role in organizations like ASEAN (Dent 2002, Loh 2023).

Indeed, using Qin (2018a)'s example of ASEAN, Singapore can leverage its multilateral relations to balance larger powers, like the US and China. Operationally, these multilateral relations can tie Singapore to a growing host of countries, helping pool power resources and make independent hedging increasingly feasible. Singapore's position within the international order is highly relational, due to the complex web of intersecting interests that constitute Singapore's identity as a trading hub. Thus, relational power can explain why Singapore can have an oversized international footprint. Singapore's use of relational power is not unique, given that most states are highly internationally connected in a globalized economy. However, because of Singapore's small size and lack of traditional power resources, relational power could have a uniquely large impact on Singaporean power enhancement.

Consequently, Relational theory builds on Realist and ES analyses by providing an operationalization mechanism for Singapore's balancing strategy, explaining the unique factors

that allow Singapore to effectively balance the US and China. Singapore has found niche cooperation avenues with the US and China, thereby preserving stable relations and communication with both. Moreover, Singapore's position as a trade hub allows for heightened Singaporean power and international importance, allowing Singapore to use these tools to realize foreign policy goals. In contrast to Realist and ES conceptions of power and foreign policy operationalization, Singapore's outsized power is fundamentally communal and reliant on international win-win mentalities, which lend support to strong Singaporean economic influence - aligning closer to Qin's conception of relational power. While Realism and ES are still effective at explaining Singaporean grand strategy, relationality is needed to explain how grand strategy can be achieved.

## **5. Alternative Explanations**

Two alternative explanations, material centrality and interpersonal relations among leaders, for the enduring strength of Singaporean relations with the US and China, merit consideration.

### **5.1 Material Centrality and Realism**

Farrell and Newman (2019) propose a framework of "weaponized interdependence" where certain states, because of their position within the global economy on nodes of connections, are best placed to leverage these connections for national security objectives (ibid). "Asymmetric dependence" is fundamental to this concept (ibid). While states might trade with each other, one country might rely on this bilateral trade more (ibid). For example, the US can leverage the SWIFT financial communication system to cut actors off from the global financial system, while using large US-domiciled data centers to surveil international actors (ibid). Similarly, China, through manufacturing power, can weaponize its position in global supply chains to pressure foreign actors (ibid). Singapore has placed itself at the center of global trading, becoming crucial to multiple countries' economic and energy security; this has arguably decreased foreign incentives in escalating tensions with the nation (Casey and Sussex 2012). Thus, it remains

possible for Singapore to weaponize this interdependence to operationalize its hedging strategy, disincentivizing conflict by significantly increasing the associated costs.

While Singapore wields power because it is a global trade hub, with China and the US, Singapore's interdependence with the two powers remains asymmetric. China is Singapore's largest trading partner (MOFA Singapore 2024). However, China makes up around 12% of Singapore's total trade, while Singapore only accounts for 1.8% of China's (WITS 2025; General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China 2024). Similarly, US trade with Singapore accounts for 10.8% of Singapore's total, while Singapore only accounts for 2.2% of the US's total (WITS 2025; US Office of Technology Evaluation 2022). Singapore relies on trade with China and the US more than both nations rely on Singapore. This is hardly surprising, given the drastic geographic and resource differences. Thus, Singapore is asymmetrically dependent on China and the US, meaning both nations should theoretically be able to exert more leverage over Singapore (Farrell and Newman 2019). Additionally, Singapore's port is not unique in the Strait of Malacca. Other Malaysian and Indonesian ports such as Malacca, Klang, Medan, and Penang are positioned along the strait and serve as major trading hubs (Jeevan et al. 2015). Singapore might be situated at a geographical chokepoint, but is far from the only relevant port in the strait. If relations with Singapore deteriorated, foreign nations could turn to a litany of alternatives. Material centrality thus does not represent an adequate framework to analyze Singapore's hedging power in a Sino-American context.

## 5.2 Leadership and Interpersonal Relations

Lee Kuan Yew's role in Singapore's economic development is well-documented, constructing multifaceted economic policies to create strong growth and pragmatic foreign relations to secure Singaporean independence (Alam 2015). Focusing on the role of Lee's interpersonal relations with other world leaders, Kishore Mahbubani (2017), Singapore's former representative to the UN, said, "the great powers treated [Lee Kuan Yew] with respect as a global statesman." Lee built strong personal ties with global leaders, from Richard Nixon to Deng Xiao Ping,

significantly contributing to Singapore's international recognition (Mahbubani 2022; Fook 2018; Lee 1998, 2011).

While Lee Kuan Yew's role in developing Singapore's international image and building the nation is undeniable, scholarly research about Lee's interpersonal relations remain analytically non-causal; that is to say, centering Lee's relations as merely an instrument of diplomacy or a function of materialist factors such as Singapore's strategic location and developing economy (Er 2021). Thus, more research is needed to clarify the specific roles of Lee's interpersonal relations on Singaporean international image before arguing its centrality. Additionally, in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era, Singaporean prime ministers such as Goh Chok Tong's, Lee Hsien Loong's, and Lawrence Wong's international interpersonal relations remain under-studied, making it difficult to prove the continuity in strong interpersonal connections. Thus, while the role of Lee Kuan Yew in the cultivation of the Singaporean foreign policy philosophy is undoubtedly significant, the general notion of interpersonal relations remains a weak causal explanation for Singapore's ability to effectively hedge great powers.

Methodologically, while it might be feasible to create theoretical frameworks which focus on individual leaders' cognitive imagery of foreign countries and foreign policy decisions, the lack of archival access and difficulty in falsifiably proving individual mentalities renders research on the causal mechanisms of interpersonal relations amongst leaders difficult (Jervis 1976; Hermann et al. 1997; Tallis 2024). Nonetheless, interpersonal relations are reconcilable with Qin (2018a, 2016)'s relationality because it serves to increase the intimacy between nations, which can explain strong cooperation and ability to manage tensions under the "kinship dilemma". Synthesizing interpersonal approaches with material and cultural factors, such as economic interdependence and ethnic synergies, can create a more complete picture of the strength of Singapore's great power relations.

## **6. Conclusion**

In the new era of US-China competition, Singapore has been able to forge a unique path for itself, reaping the benefits of cooperation with both these global powers. Realist and ES conceptions are incredibly useful to explain Singaporean balancing preferences. However, Relational theory is needed to account for how Singapore operationalizes different forms of power and cooperation to retain strategic autonomy. This essay has thus demonstrated the applicability of emerging Chinese IR theories, specifically Qin's Relational Theory, in the Singaporean - Indo-Pacific context.

Despite Qin (2018b)'s claim that Chinese approaches can be synthesized with existing Western approaches, more research is needed to unearth how Chinese approaches specifically relate to existing mainstream IR theories. In Singapore's case, further investigation is required to assess how leaders themselves view the role of relations in their foreign policy. While leaders might be cognizant of their relations with leaders of great powers, foreign policy might be made without these considerations in mind. It might be the case that Singaporean leaders still show "abridged Realist" inclinations (Chong 2006). Relationality might just supplement other Realist focused goals.

While Singaporean cooperation with the US and China is growing, continued successful balancing relies on shrewd management of competing interests. As demands from each power increase with heightened rivalries, Singapore could be forced to choose a side.

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