



**SINGAPORE–US RELATIONS 2004–2024:
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THEORIES**

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Abstract

The relationship between small states and major powers within an asymmetric, anarchic international system is shaped by power disparities that constrain the autonomy of smaller nations. This study addresses the structural vulnerabilities Singapore faces in sustaining strategic autonomy amid escalating US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia. The central research question is: how did Singapore calibrate its foreign policy toward the United States between 2004 and 2024 to secure its core national interests without becoming locked into rigid alignment? Using a qualitative-descriptive method, the study conducts a content analysis of official policy documents, diplomatic statements, and international reports. The analytical framework draws on analytical eclecticism, integrating Realism (hedging), Liberalism (economic interdependence), and Constructivism (identity and the rules-based order). The findings show that Singapore has run an adaptive dual-hedging strategy: through Realism, it secured defense cooperation with the US to offset regional uncertainty; through Liberalism, it deepened trade interdependence and multilateral engagement via ASEAN; and through Constructivism, the bilateral partnership is reinforced by a shared commitment to a rules-based order. The contribution of this study is to strengthen the small-state foreign policy literature by giving empirical support to analytical eclecticism, showing that small-state responses to major powers form a dynamic, multidimensional calculus rather than a single determined path.

Keywords: Singapore, United States, International Relations Theories, Small States, Dual Hedging.



INTRODUCTION

Understanding how states interact within a unequal international system remains one of the central problems in international relations. The relationship between a small state such as Singapore and a major power such as the United States exposes the strategies smaller actors use to protect their interests inside a system major powers still largely define. Singapore, with limited territory and population, occupies a strategically important position in Southeast Asia and has built a foreign policy defined by flexibility and pragmatism to secure its interests and sustain stable development. The United States, for its part, has maintained cooperative ties with Singapore that extend beyond trade into security and diplomacy.

This article applies international relations theories to Singapore's foreign policy toward the United States to examine how a small state operates within a system shaped by major powers. Realism, liberalism, and constructivism are used together, rather than in isolation, because none of them alone accounts for the full range of considerations behind Singapore's choices. Read together, they show that the Singapore-US relationship is not reducible to a simple balance of power; it also involves economic interdependence and shared normative commitments.

The period from 2004 to 2024 is analytically significant because it spans the intensification of US-China strategic competition in Southeast Asia, giving a natural test of how a small state adjusts its foreign policy under rising external pressure. The research question guiding this study is: how did Singapore calibrate its foreign policy toward the United States over this period to protect its core interests while avoiding entanglement in rigid alignment with either major power?

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Defining "Small States"

There is no single accepted definition of a "small state" in international studies; scholars typically combine several criteria:

- Population: nations with populations below roughly ten million are commonly classified as small states (World Bank, n.d.).

- Territory: common thresholds range from under 10,000 km² to under 100,000 km² (World Bank, n.d.).
- Economy: nations with GDP below approximately USD 10 billion are often included in this category (World Bank, n.d.).
- Political influence: states with a limited role in the global power structure and constrained military capacity.

For this study, a small state is defined as a nation with limited territory, a small population, a constrained economic scale, and little independent influence over regional or global politics.

Defining "Major Powers"

A major power is generally understood as a state whose territory, population, and resources give it disproportionate capacity to shape politics, security, diplomacy, the economy, and culture beyond its own borders, and to influence the operation of the broader international order (Lý luận chính trị, n.d.). Commonly used criteria include population size, economic weight, military capability, and political influence in international institutions (Thomas & Craigwell, 2008; Mofid, 2020). The United States, China, Japan, and the EU states are typically cited as examples. For this study, a major power is a state with a large population and economy, advanced technological and military capacity, and the ability to shape international and regional politics – though classification still depends on context and the criteria applied.

Small State–Major Power Relations: Benefits and Risks

Small states cannot avoid engaging major powers, since cooperation typically yields more benefits than the costs of conflict (Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004). The relationship offers several potential benefits: security guarantees, access to major-power markets and investment, diplomatic backing on issues such as territorial disputes or trade, and development cooperation in areas like technology and infrastructure. It also carries genuine risks. Major powers can impose unwelcome conditions or seek to make small states dependent on their strategic direction (Walt, 1985). Engagement can also open the door to interference in domestic affairs – one documented case is the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, when IMF-brokered rescue packages, actively pushed by the Clinton administration, imposed austerity terms on Indonesia that intensified the unrest which contributed to President Suharto's resignation in 1998 (National Security Archive, 2018). Finally, asymmetries in power can be leveraged by major powers to subordinate a small state's interests to their own.

Theoretical Perspectives on Small State–Major Power Relations

Realist Perspective

Realism reads small state–major power relations as an expression of unequal capability. Major powers hold superior resources, military strength, and political authority, and can shape or constrain the choices of smaller states. Both sides pursue their own national interest, but small states must do so within constraints major powers impose. To manage this asymmetry, small states may build alliances or negotiate arrangements that preserve room to manoeuvre while limiting coercive pressure (Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004).

Liberal Perspective

Liberalism emphasizes sovereignty, legal equality between states, economic interdependence, and cooperative institutions as mechanisms that can offset raw power asymmetries. Reduced trade barriers and open economic partnership are treated as generating mutual benefit rather than dependency, and multilateral frameworks are seen as a route through which small states can align with broader international goals on more equal terms.

Small-State Strategies toward Major Powers: Balancing, Bandwagoning, and Hedging

The literature on small-state behaviour toward major powers identifies three recurring strategies: balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging.

Balancing

Balancing describes small states building internal capability and external alliances to offset the power of a dominant state (Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004). It is a foundational concept in realist theory and remains contested: some treat it as close to a systemic regularity, others as a policy choice, and still others as a framework that can mask unequal distribution of benefits between major and small powers (Tuán, 2014). Historically, 19th-century Thailand balanced between Britain and France to avoid colonization; more recently, ASEAN states have cultivated ties with the United States, the EU, Japan, and India, partly through frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN+3, to offset a more assertive China in the South China Sea (Paul, Wirtz, & Fortmann, 2004).

Bandwagoning

Bandwagoning is, in Walt's (1985) formulation, the inverse of balancing: a weaker state aligns with the power that threatens it in order to avoid confrontation, and in turn tries to use that alignment as leverage for its own interests (Schweller, 1994). Thailand's alignment with

Japan during the Second World War, followed by its post-war shift toward the United States, is a standard illustration of the pattern.

Hedging

Hedging sits between balancing and bandwagoning and has become the dominant framework for explaining how Southeast Asian states, including Singapore, respond to US-China competition (Kuik, 2008; Goh, 2005). Evelyn Goh describes hedging as a set of strategies states use to avoid committing to a single alternative – balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality — under uncertainty. Wang Dong (2015) refines this into a definition of dual hedging as an insurance strategy states adopt to reduce risk, preserve freedom of action, diversify their strategic options, and pursue their preferred outcomes without needing to choose a side. This framing fits Singapore's position well: China's growth creates real economic opportunity for Singapore, but its rise also raises concerns for smaller neighbours over sovereignty and territorial security, and dual hedging lets Singapore capture the economic upside while limiting exposure to the risks. Cai (2013) further specifies that a small state is likely to pursue dual hedging, rather than a firmer alignment, only when it faces no direct security threat forcing an alliance, no sharp ideological divide with either major power, and no external rivalry so acute that a choice becomes unavoidable. In practice, dual hedging combines soft or indirect balancing, engagement across political, economic, and strategic domains, and the enmeshment of major powers in regional institutions to support stability (Wang Dong, 2015). More recent scholarship extends this account: Min (2025) shows Singapore using multilateral economic frameworks tied to both the US and China as instruments of hedging rather than pure balancing, while Lee (2021) documents Singapore's institutional hedging through regional regimes such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Shangri-La Dialogue.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive method built on content analysis of official policy documents, diplomatic statements, speeches, interviews, and international reports covering the period 2004-2024. Realism, liberalism, and constructivism are applied jointly, in the spirit of analytical eclecticism, to interpret the political and strategic dynamics between Singapore and the United States. This combination is used because Singapore's foreign policy choices reflect security calculations, economic interests, and identity commitments simultaneously, and no single paradigm captures all three. Primary materials – including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's public statements and interviews – are treated as first-hand

evidence of Singapore's stated foreign policy reasoning, while secondary academic literature on hedging and small-state behaviour is used to situate these statements within the broader theoretical debate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Singapore's Foreign Policy Logic Under Lee Hsien Loong

Given Singapore's limited territory and population, and its position within a region historically not always favourably disposed toward it, its leadership – from Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong to Lee Hsien Loong – has approached foreign policy with a clear-eyed sense of the country's own strengths and constraints, oriented toward what former President S. R. Nathan called the core task of ensuring "the independence, survival, and development of Singapore" (Wang Dong, 2015).

In a May 2001 interview conducted while he was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Lee Hsien Loong discussed the pressure globalization places on Singapore's cultural identity and social cohesion, arguing that the country's prosperity is tied to sustaining an open, connected global economy (PBS, Commanding Heights, n.d.). He has also taken a pragmatic view of China's rise, treating it as an opportunity for regional economic development – including for Singapore – while acknowledging that it complicates the region's security and economic balance.

- Rules-based order: Lee has repeatedly stressed the importance of a rules-based international order and called on China to engage responsibly with global institutions.
- Regional stability: he has emphasized dialogue among regional states to manage differences without escalation.
- Multilateralism: he has framed ASEAN and related multilateral frameworks as the primary channel for addressing the complexities of China's rise.
- A level playing field: he has argued for fair trade terms and stronger intellectual-property protection as conditions for sustained economic competitiveness.

The US Role in Southeast Asian Security and Development

Lee Hsien Loong has consistently framed the United States as a key partner for regional security. At the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue, he stated that the US "remains a dominant Pacific power," with its Pacific Command and Seventh Fleet central to regional peace and stability

(Tan, 2016). This assessment reflects Singapore's concern that an unchecked rise in Chinese influence could destabilize the region; former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argued that Singapore's progress depends on regional order, peace, and growth rather than conflict (Lee, 2008). Regional stability also has a direct economic payoff for Singapore, since it underpins the country's ability to attract trade and investment despite its limited scale.

Lee has also stressed the economic weight of the US presence, noting that American foreign direct investment in the region substantially exceeds China's, even though China's trade volume with the region is now larger and much of that trade ultimately flows through to US markets as intermediate goods (Nguyễn cứu quốc tế, 2022). At the same time, he has been openly critical of inconsistency in US regional engagement. In a September 2016 Time interview, he argued that the US had failed to match its rhetoric of "strategic rebalancing" with the kind of concrete economic engagement China practices in the region, and pointed to the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership as evidence that Washington's commitments could not be relied upon (Bremmer, 2016). That criticism has proven durable: President Trump withdrew the US from the TPP in January 2017, and the Biden administration, while launching the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity in 2022, explicitly declined to rejoin the TPP's successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (Congressional Research Service, 2023). This has left Singapore, and the region more broadly, navigating continued uncertainty over the durability of US economic commitment even as security cooperation has deepened.

Applying the Three Theoretical Lenses

Realism: defense and security hedging.

Security cooperation between Singapore and the US expanded substantially over the period, including expanded US military access to Singaporean ports and airbases alongside the 2005 US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, giving Singapore a security partner to offset regional uncertainty without a formal defense treaty (Tan, 2016).

Liberalism: economic interdependence.

The 2005 FTA and the subsequent growth of bilateral trade illustrate how economic ties function as a stabilizing mechanism independent of shifts in the security relationship (Thomas & Craigwell, 2008). Singapore's continued participation in WTO and UN governance frameworks reflects the same liberal logic of embedding relations in rules-based institutions (Mofid, 2020).

Constructivism: shared identity and norms.

Singapore's foreign policy also reflects an identity as a small, open, and technologically advanced state invested in a rules-based order. Tan (2016) documents how the idea of "America as an indispensable security partner" gained particular salience after 2001, reinforcing a shared normative framework – rule of law, open markets – that Roy (2005) treats as central to the durability of the relationship.

Taken together, these three lenses show Singapore running an adaptive dual-hedging strategy rather than a fixed alignment: security cooperation with the US under realism, economic diversification under liberalism, and a shared normative identity under constructivism, calibrated continuously as the US-China balance shifts.

CONCLUSION

Viewed through realism, liberalism, and constructivism together, the Singapore-US relationship between 2004 and 2024 shows a small state managing a major power relationship through calibrated flexibility rather than fixed alignment. Realism explains Singapore's continued reliance on the US as a security partner amid regional uncertainty; liberalism accounts for the depth of economic cooperation built on trade agreements and shared participation in multilateral institutions; and constructivism explains why the relationship has held together even where US policy has been inconsistent, through a shared commitment to a rules-based order. Singapore's experience suggests that small-state foreign policy is not a single strategic choice but a continuously adjusted calculus across security, economic, and normative dimensions – a dynamic that analytical eclecticism captures better than any one theory alone.

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