

Singaporean foreign policy in a shifting international order

By KOGA Kei

1. Principles of Singaporean foreign policy

Singapore is a small country with a population of 5.45 million and an area of 725km². While being overwhelmingly scarce in natural resources and extremely dependent on trade with other countries, it is located in the geopolitically important Strait of Malacca. Domestically, the People's Action Party (PAP), the ruling political party, constantly secures more than 90 percent of all parliamentary seats, which makes Singapore's domestic politics and foreign policy stable.

In this context, Singaporean foreign policy is built on two principles: pragmatism and vulnerability. "Pragmatism" refers to be constantly rational under the assumption that there are no permanent friends or enemies in international relations as stated by Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam in 1965 and that Singapore needs to be economically viable and attractive for foreign countries in order to survive in a severe international environment. "Vulnerability" refers to the belief that Singapore is physically vulnerable as its security and prosperity are always dependent on other countries. Lee Kuan Yew once stated in his 2011 speech that Singapore is "an 80-storey building standing on marshy land," which implies that it is extremely difficult to defend Singapore from major powers for a long term. Under these principles, Singaporean foreign policy emphasizes the importance of "international law/rules" and "equidistant diplomacy."

2. Singaporean foreign policy in practice

The reason for the emphasis on international law/rules is that it is a tool to constrain major powers that tend to conduct "power politics." This is because international legitimacy currently rests on the principle of majority rule that nurtures international law/rules. However, its limitation is that major powers often neglect the law and rules. For example, China expressed concern over Singapore's emphasis on the international law that included the South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal award because the award damages its national interest. Three months after the statement, China seized Singapore's Terrex, the armored personnel carrier, en route back to Singapore from Taiwan. Although the links between these two facts have not been officially clear, Singapore needed to consider the balance between its national interests and international law/rules.

Equidistant diplomacy aims to defend Singapore's political autonomy and independence as a sovereign state by maintaining friendly relationship with all major powers. This does not necessarily mean, however, an equal diplomatic distance with all major powers; depending on the evolving strategic situation, the distance with one major power could be closer than others. Singapore maintains the "non-alignment" position with a guiding principle of "not to be entrapped in major powers' politics, not to be abandoned by major powers." Hence, it does not assume pure "neutrality" as it is often purported to. However, equidistant diplomacy also has its own shortcoming—it cannot be effective if the major powers does not recognize its legitimacy. To date, Singapore has pursued security cooperation with both the US and China through defense agreements and joint military exercises so as not to be seen as "taking-sides" by either the US or China.

3. Future prospects

Given the current intensification of the US-China competition, it is likely that Singapore would find it increasingly difficult to maintain its foreign policy practice. Major powers would not always observe international law and would change their interpretation of the law in accordance with their national interest. Furthermore, ASEAN has been struggling in dealing with the issues of Myanmar and the South China Sea, and without substantial assistance from external actors, it is likely to remain so. For this reason, Singapore will further strengthen its relationship with external major powers and middle powers to secure alternatives, although it continuously emphasizes the importance of ASEAN.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by KOGA Kei, Assistant Professor, School of Social Sciences / S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, at the 91st Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on August 22, 2022.)