



SMC 2019

Singapore Model Cabinet

(Singapore's Foreign Policy)

First Topic

Singapore as a Middle Man

Second Topic

Singapore's Bilateral Relations with Malaysia

Singapore as a middle man

Introduction

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a middle man is *someone who communicates or makes arrangements between two people or groups who are unwilling or unable to meet or deal directly with each other*. In the realm of international relations, this can come from playing host to a summit between two nations (as Singapore did for the US/North Korea summit in 2018) or to even simply being an arbitrator for nations at disputes. While the middle man is not directly involved in the issue at hand, countries often play this role for the less tangible benefits, such as for an improvement of one's international repute or other diplomatic gains. Countries are able to portray themselves as neutral parties and one willing to work with the international community, thus allowing them to forward their diplomatic agenda on the world stage. By playing such a role, nations are often looking to show to the world that they are friendly and willing to work with other nations on the international stage, thus gaining diplomatic points for the country.

However the extent this can be achieved is often debatable, as it is difficult to gauge the amount of "diplomatic points" a nation is able to gain through staging such international meetings or by playing such a role. Moreover, there are detriments to states playing such a role as well. Playing the middle man could potentially be construed as playing both sides, resulting in political, economic and even security implications for the middle man nation. As such, the issue of playing the middle man role is a complex one, especially in today's increasingly volatile, unpredictable and bipolar world.

Where the middle man comes in

The middle man in international politics goes beyond the provision of a physical location - simply being someone in between two other nations can be said to be playing the middle man role. Countries looking to play such roles are often those seeking to take a neutral stance in international relations and not lean towards the side of any particular nation, with an example being Switzerland which has played such a role before. Switzerland played host in 1954 to the Geneva Convention which helped resolve problems in Korea and Indochina and overall remains largely neutral in the realm of international politics as well (Cohen, 2017). And in another case, Norway played the role of a middleman in 1993 and helped broker an agreement between Israel and Palestine en route to peace in the Middle East (Engelberg, 1993). This is one method of diplomacy which countries can choose to employ - they use such means to signal their neutrality to the world, and seek cooperation with all sides as the best diplomatic course of action.

Singapore's role

Singapore, being a politically neutral state, has often been used as a neutral ground for such talks in the past. Singapore has often offered its neutrality as an honest broker for regional and international conflicts and disputes. In such a context, Singapore has mirrored nations such as Switzerland and Norway in the middle man approach to foreign diplomacy and international relations. Singapore had chosen such a path due to its unique political situation in 1965, where it was cast away from Malaysia, a newly independent nation in a troubled region. A tiny red dot at the tip of Southeast Asia, it realised that it

needed 'friends' rather than enemies in order to maintain its security and sovereignty. Singapore knew that any enemies made could easily undermine and overwhelm Singapore. Thus, it sought co-operation with as many nation-states as it could to forward its progress and development. As such, playing the middle man was of key importance to Singapore - it allowed the nation to portray its political neutrality to the world stage, and display its intentions to seek cooperation and unity with the international community. The middle man strategy has allowed Singapore to manoeuvre carefully within larger regional and international frameworks, securing common understanding on key issues, lending their voice, and sometimes services as honest broker, and as a result, become an "over-achiever" that has "punched above its weight" in international affairs (Chuang, 2015).

Singapore has played this role of a middle man and positioned itself as a staging ground for high profile summits between conflicting parties. In 2015, the leaders of Taiwan and China met in Singapore (Tan, 2015). China and Taiwan have long held political tensions ever since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, with both sides not recognising the legitimacy of the other, and this was to be the first meeting between the leaders of the two sides since the end of the civil war. Singapore was chosen as it offered a high degree of public order where the risk of civil unrest surrounding their meeting would be low, in addition to sharing many cultural similarities with both China and Taiwan (Wasserstrom, 2015).

Similarly, in 2018, the leaders of the United States of America and North Korea met in Singapore as well - putting Singapore on the world map once more (and alluding to the

value that middle man diplomacy has for Singapore's international reputation). In fact one of the key factors that allowed for the USA-North Korea summit to occur, was Singapore's neutrality. With the USA and North Korea locked in a diplomatic gridlock due to their initial policy of non-recognition for each other, a summit meeting between both was initially impossible. However, Singapore, which was one of the few nations in the world that shared bilateral relations with both the USA and North Korea, offered an opportunity, and a potential venue for the meeting (Lee, 2018). The rest, is history.

Historical Situation

Post-independence Singapore

Post-independence Singapore sought diplomacy and cooperation with other nations as the way to seek progress and development, and as such, sought ties with as many nations as possible whilst remaining politically neutral. Singapore joined the United Nations and the Commonwealth as part of its plan to be neutral and seek cooperation with the international community on a whole, which Singapore had perceived to be the best course of action for the small nation. Singapore, as a small country, sought to punch above its weight - and neutrality was the best way to do it, not taking sides and instead working with all parties to achieve the best outcome.

Singapore knew that it could be easily overwhelmed by foreign hostile powers, and thus chose to adopt what Lee Kuan Yew dubbed the “poisonous shrimp” strategy - Singapore may be small like a shrimp, but it would be painful to “swallow” (Fang, 2013). This allowed

Singapore to co-exist amongst larger nations on the international scene - as a neutral nation whom others should take seriously. It served as a means of deterrence for Singapore against potential hostile forces as well.

Opening Singapore as a middle man for international talks and summits was a means taken by Singapore to showcase its political neutrality, and instead seek diplomacy with all of the international community. Even through the Cold War, Singapore remained a neutral party and did not side with either the USA or the USSR, and instead was a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, an organisation of states who sought to remain neutral amidst the bipolarisation of the world during the Cold War (NTI, 2018). Such a strategy was viable then, as neutrality allowed Singapore to establish relations with both sides and avoid the pitfalls of a "zero-sum game" or an "with us or against us" mind-set that the Cold War entailed (Chua, 2017).

With end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, it also spelt the end of the ideological divide that had affected international relations for more than forty years during the Cold War. In such a context, Singapore was also able to continue its neutral, middle man role with much success, as international norms became less ideological and less bipolar in nature.

Current Situation

The world today

However, the world today has changed. The Cold War has ended, and today, new players are vying for control on the international stage. The “big players” on the international stage have changed too - no longer was it the USA and the USSR fighting it out for political control, rather, we now have the USA and China vying for greater influence on the international stage – resulting in trade wars, political tensions, and even territorial contestations in the Asia Pacific region.

The Growth of China

China has also changed. China is no longer the poor, weak state it once was in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War. It has now grown to become the second largest economy in the world, achieving nearly 10% year-on-year economic growth since opening up its economy for trade in 1978 and has lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty (World Bank, 2018). With its rise as a great power, China has increasingly asserted itself in foreign policy matters more strongly in recent years. Singapore has been implicated as a result of this as well. In recent years, China has been increasingly critical of Singapore's neutral position, and accused Singapore of "playing both sides" and even stressed that Singapore should pick a side, and preferably one aligned with Chinese interests (Sarwari, 2016). In addition, China has also more tangibly reacted against Singapore's neutrality. In 2016-17, the Terrex Issue was a clear indication of the new assertive China of our world today. Singapore has long held ties with both the People's Republic of China (China) and

the Republic of China (Taiwan) (albeit informally), two sides which both claim to be the legitimate China. While such a situation worked out for Singapore for many years, the PRC finally took action in 2016 with the Terrex Issue, where it was widely believed that the PRC government had instructed the Hong Kong port to detain terrex vehicles which had been used for military training in Taiwan when it would arrive on its shores 2 days after leaving the port of Xiamen (ANI, 2016). This was in part a reaction to Singapore's position regarding the 2016 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on the South China Sea against China. China had rejected the ruling, while Singapore had stood by the ICJ. To the Chinese, this was clearly an affront to their national interests, and the confiscation of Singapore's terrex vehicles were clearly an indication that the Chinese government were increasingly frustrated with Singapore's middle man manoeuvring, and therefore has taken action against Singapore for "playing both sides". The message was clear - align with China, lose the shroud of neutrality, or risk China's wrath (Chan, 2017).

The Chinese animosity was even clearer when seen in light of 2017 developments. As a leading economic power, China has put in place a Belt and Road initiative to enhance regional economic cooperation. It is a massive economic plan that would provide Singapore with greater economic opportunities. According to a Straits Times report in 2017, Singapore can leverage on our unique location in between East and West and serve as a middleman between larger parties and eventually position ourselves at the heart of a new global trade ecosystem (Teo, 2017). Thus, this initiative can potentially be of great benefit to Singapore, both in terms of economic and diplomatic gain.

However, due to China's displeasure with Singapore's politicking, Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, was not invited to the One Belt One Road Summit in 2017 - a high key meeting where Chinese President, Xi Jinping networked with other national leaders about OBOR opportunities. According to the South China Morning Post, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was not among the many heads of government invited to a summit for Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road project, suggesting Beijing was still smarting from their recent diplomatic spat (Jaipragas, 2017). It was also noteworthy that in sharp contrast, regional counterparts including Malaysia's Najib Razak, Indonesia's Joko Widodo and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte were invited; and smaller nations with less-established diplomatic ties with Beijing also sent their heads of government to the summit. These included Fiji, Chile, Greece, and Hungary (Jaipragas, 2017).

With China now increasingly assertive and seeking to build its own sphere of influence, it is now seeking clearer allies to support it in its economic and political objectives. Singapore's stance of political neutrality is then thrown into question - how would it fit into the new grand scheme of things? Would neutrality still pay as many dividends as it once did? Can Singapore still afford to remain neutral in the larger scheme of things today?

A New Bipolar World?

With such immense growth experienced by China in the recent few decades and the political might it can now command, it seems ever likely that we are heading into another

bipolar world - akin to what we had in the Cold War era. But one thing is different - the state of neutrality. China as it is today is able and certainly willing to exert its might, as can be seen in the 2016 ICJ ruling on sovereignty in the South China Sea where China had simply disregarded the ruling of the ICJ which had not been in its favour (Phillips, 2016), and the Philippines, who had instead won the case, had little means to fight back.

The China of today, with its economic might, is able to assert itself on other nations, and force them to make a choice between siding with China or their competitors. While it might have been beneficial to remain neutral in the cold war era, as seen by the formation of the non-aligned movement as discussed in earlier paragraphs, the situation of the world has changed today. It can now be said that neutrality has lost its purpose in the world today with the new, assertive China forcing countries to take a side, and siding with China or the US and its allies might prove to be more beneficial than staying neutral.

Singapore itself

Singapore has also changed. In light of broader changes in the global geopolitical context, it is noteworthy that Singapore has also evolved as a city-state within that framework. In a short span of 54 years, Singapore has undergone massive transformation - from a nation that had to survive the British withdrawal, a merger with Malaysia, as well as sudden independence - to a global city that has placed itself at international economic, trade, financial, and technological intersections. With such massive transformation over the past 50 years, some have argued that Singapore could flex its muscles in foreign diplomacy, or take on a position that could be more assertive (Khanna, 2013).

However, as Minister of Trade and Industry, Chan Chun Sing has mentioned, Singapore, as a small state, "must continue to be principled and neutral in its dealings with other countries as it looks to remain relevant to the outside world." It cannot be put in a position where a price can be put to Singapore's stand and position - where such short term gains would lead to a compromise on Singapore's integrity and interests in the long term. (CNA, 2018). As current Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan has consistently stated, Singapore has to remain effectively neutral to be an effective middle man to guard Singapore's interests and to also gain the trust of the international community as a neutral and honest moderator in global and regional conflicts (Ghosh, 2018).

Nonetheless, it should also be noted that Singapore's neutrality should not be mistaken for weakness. As Balakrishnan has also mentioned, Singapore's middle man status does not mean that Singapore has to comply with the demands of its bigger neighbours or even the global powers. Singapore's diplomacy must remain consistent, based on the strength of its domestic unity and resilience, and it cannot be intimidated or bought at all costs - even if it means saying "no" to powers bigger and more powerful than itself (Balakrishnan, 2019).

As Ambassador-at-Large Ong Keng Yong stressed in a commentary, Singapore has always adopted a friendly approach to friendly states, and has always been sensitive in managing foreign policy. He also mentioned that while Singapore does not go around looking for trouble, but when necessary, Singapore has stood up to pressure from other states when its interests were at stake (Yong, 2017). Moreover, yielding would also set a

dangerous precedent, both in bilateral relationships and international law. Furthermore, as Minister of Law, K. Shanmugam said in a Facebook post, "once you allow yourself to be bullied, then you will continue to be bullied" (Yong, 2017). This goes to show that while Singapore has adopted middle man neutrality in its foreign policy, it is a position that remains principled, consistent - a position that would guard Singapore's core national interest - can this be so easily abandoned?

Cost-Benefit Analysis

Benefits

There certainly are benefits for Singapore in the playing of its middle man role.

Maintaining its status as a neutral middle man able to provide either a neutral ground for arbitration of disputes or as a honest broker able to mediate conflict - this has resulted in scholars and international observers' claim that Singapore has managed to earn major diplomatic points and "punch above its weight" in international affairs.(Chuang, 2015). This continues to be an important aspect of Singapore's diplomacy even today. As the recently concluded Trump-Kim Summit has revealed, "Singapore's important place in the world of politics, economy and human development has been reaffirmed and strengthened." It was clearly another example of "the country's oft-cited ability to punch above its weight, the value of even-handed, straight-talking diplomacy, and a buttressing of its soft power." (Wai, 2018)

Costs

However, small states employing such a diplomatic strategy has its risks as well. As Kishore Mahbubani has noted in 2017, "small states must act like small states", and "mounds of money" coupled with powerful friends should not prompt it to act like a middle power. He then alluded to Qatar's actions which resulted in a diplomatic backlash from its neighbours, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE. This implies that Singapore's use of its neutral middle man strategy to "punch above its weight" in international relations was inherently dangerous, and could very well backfire on Singapore (Yong, 2017).

One cost of being a middle man would be that it opens the country up to scrutiny. As a middle man, this can potentially throw a country's loyalties into question, and increase international scrutiny of the nation's foreign policy - especially in today's geopolitical climate of increasing bipolarity between the USA and China. Singapore too is well aware of this. In 2017, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong suggested that Singapore may one day have to choose between either being friends with China or the US, not both, and that Singapore's loyalties to both parties could one day be tested (Chandran, 2017). The whole idea of the middle man role would be to position a country as a diplomat and one whom anyone can trust and work with - but should a country's loyalties come into question, or if Singapore is "pressured" to choose a side - then its middle man strategy can be said to then be counter-productive.

Another concern would also be the monetary cost of opening up a country as a middle ground for other nations to meet. Staging such international events comes at an extremely high price tag; a cost which Singapore often has to bear with little reimbursement, with

one example being the Trump-Kim summit in 2018 which cost Singapore S\$16.3 million to host. (MFA, 2018). Furthermore, with the threat of terrorism being extremely real and pertinent today, the cost of security of such events have also further increased the cost to the host nation. Hence, millions of dollars are spent on each event catering to logistical and security needs, ensuring that all will proceed smoothly, often amounting to tens of millions of dollars spent without any direct and concrete benefits for the taxpayers who fund such government expenditure.

Moving Forward

The Middle Man

Overall, representatives should link the debate back to the core ideas of this role - why Singapore has chosen to play the middle man role, the benefits that Singapore has gained out of this role and why Singapore is able to achieve such benefits from doing so. Representatives should also then consider the changes that have happened from the past to the present - and how this would then impact the gains we are able to achieve from this role, and discuss whether it would still be worthwhile to continue playing such a role.

Ultimately, representatives should consider what the best course of action for Singapore would be, to allow Singapore to protect its sovereignty and maximise its benefits from international relations.

Singapore's role in the future

The world faces tough times ahead, and Singapore too is not spared from this. Singapore will face tough times ahead balancing between both China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and this is just one of the balances Singapore has to strike in playing its role as a middleman (Teo, 2016). Singapore has to play a fine balancing act - to befriend and work with world superpowers while also showcasing and impressing them with Singapore's earnest and pragmatic approach towards international relations (Chong, 2016).

However, the issue at hand is certainly not black or white - no simple answer as to whether or not Singapore should play this role can be reached. Instead, representatives should consider the factors at play in such decision-making and re-evaluate our historical stance to see whether or not changes are necessary moving ahead. But one thing is clear - that representatives should decide which course of action would be the best for Singapore to pursue, and have a strong case for whichever choice they make.

Questions for Discussion

1. What benefits were Singapore able to gain through playing the middle man role in the past? And can we still gain these benefits moving forward?
2. How would neutrality look like in the future of international politics? And how would Singapore fit into all of it?
3. What benefits does Singapore need moving forward? And how important is political neutrality to Singapore moving ahead?
4. Most importantly, what would be in the best interest of Singapore and its people? And how then would representatives be able to achieve this?

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Singapore's Bilateral Relations with Malaysia

Introduction

On the 9th of August 1965, with its expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia, Singapore gained the distinction of being the first and only nation in modernity to have gained its independence unwillingly. Since then, they have enjoyed a “long-standing, broad and multi-faceted relationship” with both nations having “robust bilateral trade, investment and tourism ties (MFA, 2019). However, this relationship has also been characterised with bouts of inflamed tensions between the two countries over longstanding disputes regarding territory, water, maritime boundaries and the like which have thus far been managed diplomatically.

This inclination towards diplomacy as a means of resolution from both countries is a strong demonstration that the futures of the respective nations are closely intertwined in terms of the economy and security. Yet, as it is usually with matters pertaining to foreign policy, relations between Singapore and Malaysia have been influenced heavily by conflating national interests, leading to the aforementioned periodical escalation of tensions.

For the past 53 years, Singapore's approach of 'give and take' as well as its reliance on international organisations has served its interests well. But, given recent events, such as the election of Prime Minister Mahathir, with a record of redirecting his nation to foreign policy issues in order to unite it, as well as the gradual repudiation of the ability of international institutions to resolve disputes that formed a cornerstone in how Singapore

conducted its foreign policy, it is imperative that Singapore re-examine its strategies in a future that is vastly different from the world which these approaches were adapted in the first place.

As such, when reading this study guide and formulating policy, representatives are highly encouraged to take into consideration the interdependent relationship Singapore has with Malaysia and vice versa. Lastly, while foreign policy is indeed about securing a country's interest on a global stage, representatives are reminded that at times a country's interest is best secured when every party walks away from the negotiation table satisfied at least to some extent.

Historical Overview

It could be argued that the creation of Singapore as a state in 1819 was in itself an affront to Malay sovereignty. After all, it was the British who had meddled with Johorean politics of the time by installing Sultan Hussien to the throne to create the country known as Singapore today (NLB, 2004). Colonial influences then became more widespread following the establishment of British hegemony over the Malay Peninsula in 20th Century as a Malayan identity was created throughout the peninsula, including Singapore. This was a crucial factor in the formation of the Federation of Malaya in 1957 and the subsequent Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

The merger of Singapore into Malaysia was meant to provide Singapore with a common market to ensure its economic survival as well as weaken the communists in Singapore then. However, disputes over Malaysia's *bumiputera* policies proved too hard to ignore as Singapore was expelled from the Federation in 1965 (NLB, 2019).

Singapore's proximity to the then hostile Indonesia (due to the *Konfrontasi*) as well as the fear of a unfavorable reabsorption into Malaysia led it to develop some sort of a "siege mentality" with massive amounts of resources dedicated to building up a strong military to act as a deterrent against potential invaders (Guo, 2013). Moreover, a robust diplomatic corps was also established in order to build relationships with foreign countries so as to secure its interests on the global stage. Since then, Singapore's foreign policy approach, especially towards its regional neighbours, is predicated on this strong and effective diplomatic corps that is empowered with the understanding that a strong military would be present to safeguard Singapore's interests in the event diplomacy fails.

Such an approach can be best encapsulated in the "poisoned shrimp" strategy that was employed by Singapore earlier on, whereby it acknowledged that while it could be "swallowed up" by their bigger neighbours, the strong military forces of Singapore would make such an option as costly as possible, thereby ensuring that it remains an undesirable course of action for their neighbours. This strategy was supplanted by the "porcupine" strategy as advocated for by then Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong which placed greater emphasis on more pro-active military actions rather than the defensive posture adopted by the "poisoned shrimp" (Huxler, 2001).

As a result of this strong military build-up, coupled with Singapore's rapid economic growth vis-a-vis Malaysia's comparatively slower growth has led to great suspicion from Malaysian leaders that Singapore would leverage upon these advantages to force upon unfavourable deals onto Malaysia. Thus, Singapore remains at the forefront of Malaysia's concerns in their strategic assessments (Dhillon, 2009). This has led to the occasional posturing from Malaysia so as to avoid the optics of being seen as weak on Singapore, and to remind Singapore of their dependence on Malaysia, as can be seen most notably in the case of the water dispute. But at the same time, Malaysian leaders recognised the need for maintaining close relations with Singapore, as evidenced in our vast areas of cooperation in terms of the economy, infrastructure as well as security.

As Singapore's defence strategy is predicated upon a strong and effective deterrence, it has remained resolute in the face of posturing by Malaysia. Although there is great desire for Singapore to resolve their disputes with Malaysia, great care has to be taken to avoid the perception of weakness and concession to Malaysia. For instance, in the maritime disputes in late 2018, Singapore, while opening diplomatic channels to Malaysia, deployed warships to confront the Malaysian vessels within Singapore (Yahya, 2018). Such balance has to be achieved in order to avoid the perception that Singapore is a weak nation that will bow down under the threat of force.

As such, Singapore's relationship with Malaysia can be best compared to that of close friends that remain suspicious and wary of each other. Below is a list of the disputes both nations have had in the past half a century.

The Dispute over Water from Johor

In 1961, the Federation of Malaya agreed to allow Singapore to draw water from Johorean reservoirs up till 2011. This agreement was supplanted by another water agreement in 1962, which allowed Singapore to draw up to 250 million galleons of water at 3 sen per thousand galleons. Johor would then be entitled to purchase treated water of a volume lesser or equivalent to 2% of the water drawn by Singapore daily at 50 sen per thousand galleons (Channel NewsAsia, 2018) This agreement, which would have run through till 2061, was guaranteed by the Malaysian Government in the Separation Agreement of 1965. This agreement also allowed for a price review 25 years into the agreement and included provisions for future price revisions that was to be done through bilateral consultation or arbitration (Channel NewsAsia, 2018).

According the Singaporean authorities, this 3 sen price was derived from the fact that Singapore had borne the full cost of treating this water. Furthermore, Singapore was actually selling treated water back to Johor at a loss as the price of treating water (which was about RM 2.40) was greater than the price Johor was paying for the water (which was about 50 sen), a fact that was appreciated by the Malaysian Government when they did not invoke their right for a price review in 1987 (Channel NewsAsia, 2018).

In 1998, following the Asian Financial Crisis, Malaysia requested a review of the water pricing as part of a larger “package” for wider cooperation that among others, included agreements on the use of Malaysian airspace by the RSAF and the construction of a replacement of the Causeway. It was during this period of time that the current water price

was discussed, with early agreements between Singapore and Malaysia being made that increased the price from 3 sen to 45 sen with the guarantee of an extension of the agreement past 2061. However, Mahathir requested for further increases in prices in 2001, eventually asking the Singaporean delegation to decouple the water agreement from the rest of the package that was earlier agreed. However, this was unacceptable for the Singaporean delegation as it meant that earlier concessions made in other areas of the “package” now no longer could be made (Channel NewsAsia, 2018).

Mahathir stepped down in 2003 and the water dispute between the two nations became a non-issue. In 2011, the first water agreement expired and as per the agreement, Singapore turned over the waterworks as well as the pump houses. Moreover, in January 2018, then Prime Minister Razak reaffirmed the 1962 Water Agreement in a Leader’s Retreat (Channel NewsAsia, 2018).

Yet, Mahathir, upon his political comeback after his Pakatan Harapan coalition won in the 14th General Election that happened in 2018, made an about-turn and brought up the water issue once more. In June the same year, he suggested that he would once again take up this issue with the Singaporean Government when he called the water prices “manifestly ridiculous” (Channel NewsAsia, 2018).

Singapore’s stance on the entire issue has been one of strict adherence to previously agreed international agreements. It is undeniable that as much as Singapore has benefited from the water agreement, Malaysia has also benefited from being able to

purchase potable water at a highly subsidised rate. As such, observers have noted that it is highly unlikely that the issue is about water prices. Instead, it is a play on nationalist rhetoric, as Malaysia attempted to distract its people from domestic ethnic and religious challenges by focussing instead on assertive foreign policy goals (Alami, 2018). This is a prominent example of how foreign policy has been influenced by resurgent nationalistic sentiments and is archetypal of the world our future foreign policy approaches must navigate in.

Pedra Branca

Pedra Branca (or Batu Puteh in Malaysian lexicon) refers to a set of rocky outcrops to the east of the Singaporean mainland. Formerly belonging to the Sultanate of Johor, it came under the administration of the British following their construction of the Horsburgh Lighthouse in 1850. Administration of Pedra Branca then fell under the responsibility of the Singaporean Government after the Second World War.

In 1953, Johorean authorities declared that the Sultanate of Johor “does not claim ownership of Pedra Branca”, leaving the island to be under Singaporean jurisdiction (NLB, 2019). Such was the case till 1979, where Malaysia published a map claiming ownership of the islands. This claim was contested by Singapore in 1980. Following the failure of bilateral talks to reach a resolution, both governments agreed to submit the issue to the International Court of Justice which ruled against Malaysia.

In 2017, Malaysia revisited the issue of Pedra Branca by filing an appeal with the International Court of Justice (ICJ), citing the discovery of new facts not considered in the previous ruling. However, following a change in government in 2018, this appeal was rescinded by the new Mahathir administration in June of the same year. (Channel NewsAsia, 2018)

Maritime Disputes

Not long after Mahathir seemingly indicated a desire for closer relations with Singapore by rescinding the Pedra Branca appeal, his administration made a u-turn by extending Johorean port limits infringing upon Singaporean maritime boundaries.

Singaporean maritime authorities responded by lodging a protest against Malaysia's actions and instructing all naval vessels to disregard Malaysia's notification. From 24 November to 5 December of 2018, 14 naval intrusions were detected from Malaysia by Singapore. (Channel NewsAsia, 2018)

In the 2nd week of December, Malaysia de-escalated the situation from withdrawing one ship from Singaporean waters. In addition, both nations also agreed on talks in the second week of January the following year to discuss the peaceful resolution of this incident. Following this, Singapore announced that they had filed a declaration under Article 298 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, ensuring that there would be no third party arbitration of any sort at this period of time (Hussain, 2018).

The Pedra Branca incidents and the maritime disputes between Singapore and Malaysia highlight the many disputes that might affect their otherwise friendly relationship (as will be evidenced below). They are also a prominent example of how both nations are inclined towards diplomacy as a means of resolution towards their disputes. The Pedra Branca

incident in particular, showcases Singapore's reliance on international arbitration to resolve disputes in the event of a negotiating standoff.

Diplomacy as a means of resolution has been successful till the time of writing, underscoring how highly valued this bilateral relationship is to both nations. Below is a short list of the areas of cooperation both countries have undertaken so far.

Security cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia

Singapore and Malaysia, along with Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom are members of the Five Power Defence Arrangements whereby members are to consult each other in the event of an attack on any party (NLB, 2019). In 1971 the Integrated Air Defence System (now known as the Integrated Area Defence System), headquartered in RMAF Butterworth, Penang, was created along with the Joint Consultative Council (now known as the FPDA Consultative Council) which allowed for close cooperation between the military leaders of Singapore, Malaysia and the rest of the member countries (NLB, 2019). Moreover, as part of the FPDA, joint military exercises were conducted and defence ministers from every member country meet in either Singapore or Malaysia every 3 years to discuss regional security issues. In the most recent edition of the FPDA Summit in 2017, all nations reaffirmed their commitment to the FPDA and pledged to continue working closely together to combat security threats of the 21st Century, particularly that of the online indoctrination of citizens by extremists (Lim, 2017).

There is also great amount of cooperation between the two nations regarding security matters due their involvement in the Association of South East Nation States. As fully fledged members of ASEAN, bureaucrats from both Singapore and Malaysia, along with the other regional partners, meet frequently under the banner of the ASEAN Political-Security Community in meetings like the ASEAN Defence Leaders Meeting to discuss regional security issues and explore means to further cooperation between the nations. This is especially apparent in the 2018 edition of the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting,

both nations as well as the rest of ASEAN agreed upon the world's first multilateral guidelines on air engagement between military aircraft (Zhang, 2018).

In addition to the aforementioned multilateral platforms, there is also great amounts of bilateral cooperation between the two militaries. The annual Exercise *Malapura*, held since 1984, is an example of the strong ties between them. It is worth noting that the 2018 edition of the exercise went ahead despite ongoing tensions over maritime borders, reaffirming the strength of the relations not only between the two militaries, but the two countries (Boey, 2018).

Economic cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia

Economic activity across the Causeway has soared since Singapore's independence with both countries enjoying close trade relations as evidenced by how in 2015, Singapore was Malaysia's largest trading partner while Malaysia was Singapore's third largest (Channel NewsAsia, 2018) In addition, Singapore is one of the largest foreign investors into the economic corridor of Iskandar, Johor and tourism across the two countries is rampant. This bustling economic activity can be explained not only by the rising affluence of both nations, but also the close economic cooperation they have undertaken.

In 1967, the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement was established, encompassing both Singapore and Malaysia. Since then, both nations have worked together closely in ASEAN over economic matters in a bid to bring their economies closer. This led to the

successful implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, which included multiple areas of cooperation between Singapore, Malaysia and the rest of the region that allows both nations to work on each other's strengths in order to elevate the competitiveness of the region as a whole, a move that will bring about increased prosperity to member nations (ASEAN, 2015). Looking forward, still ongoing are discussions on how to further integrate their economies in the 2020s, as part of the Roadmap for the Integration of ASEAN in Finance (Doody, 2018).

Furthermore, the creation of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle in 1989 linked the capital, infrastructure and expertise of Singapore with the labour and resources of Malaysia and Indonesia in order to build on their comparative advantages in order to boost the prosperity of the respective nations (NLB, 2019)

Such close co-operation over security and economic matters could have only been made possible due to the close interpersonal relationships leaders of each nation have with each other. Such relationships do not happen by chance, but rather requires a conscious effort from both sides to cultivate them. The annual Singapore-Malaysia Leaders Retreat is one such effort which allows the highest echelons of leadership to interact and establish relationships (PMO, 2018). In the same vein, military exercises provides the opportunity for defence leaders to do so and their involvement in ASEAN allows Singaporean and Malaysian officials to frequently meet and establish the interpersonal ties that are so crucial for conducive discussions to happen and for bilateral relations to be strengthened.

Challenges of the future

Malaysian Nationalism

As much as this section is labelled “challenges of the future”, Malaysian nationalism has always existed and has been a factor affecting relations between the two nations since Singapore’s independence in 1965. In 1998, in the midst of the Asian Financial Crisis, Mahathir played on grievances held by Malaysian’s towards the success of their southern neighbour by arguing that Singapore had essentially profited at the expense of Malaysia through unfair agreements. His audience that day responded to his rhetoric by encouraging him to cut off Singapore’s water supply (Fuller, 1998). Moreover, there have been occasions where high ranking Malaysian leaders would make threats towards Singapore, such as in 2003 when then Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar (as part of Mahathir’s Cabinet) threatened to declare war on Singapore over the issue of Pedra Branca (SCMP, 2003). Likewise, on 9 August 1991, Malaysia, along with Indonesia, conducted Exercise Pukul Habis, simulating an occurrence where a neighbouring country would turn hostile (Boey, 2008).

Sabre-rattling has been used as a tactic by states to rile up nationalist sentiments amongst its population. States use a mixture of rhetoric and assertive foreign policy goals to remind its people, and its neighbours of their military capabilities and willingness to deploy them should things not go their way. It is highly likely that in Malaysia’s case, it is also a tactic used to distract Malaysians from domestic issues by directing their outrage to that of a foreign ‘enemy’, which in this case, is Singapore (Kausikan, 2018). Such

actions would lead to worsened bilateral relations between Singapore and Malaysia as leaders on both sides will need to appear “tough” on the other, in order to show its domestic populace that they were serious about core national interests.

Under Mahathir in 2018, observers have expected that the deployment of these tactics would continue and with greater frequency (Kausikan, 2018). Unlike his previous tenure as Prime Minister, Mahathir is presiding over a coalition government encompassing multiple factions that represent divergent ideologies, all of which are struggling amongst the coalition over control of the country. The issue of the *bumiputera* and ICERD (International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination) for instance, has divided the coalition and resulted in a u-turn in one of the coalition’s earlier campaign promises of racial equality (New Straits Times, 2018). Moreover, the legitimacy of the coalition is also at stake as they are finding themselves failing to deliver on some of their electoral promises such as removing road tolls and abolishing the debts of farmers (New Straits Times, 2018). To make things worse, Malay nationalism is resurgent, as can be seen with a majority of Malay votes going to pro-Malay parties PKR and UMNO in the 2018 Election, as well as the occurrence of riots over an Indian temple in November 2018. Attacking Singapore would allow Mahathir to unite his fractured nation against a common enemy (Kausikan, 2018).

The Singapore response to such sabre-rattling has always been to remind Malaysia of its own might. That is why Singapore places such strong emphasis upon the maintenance of a strong military. In 1991, following the Pukul Habis exercise, Singapore begun a

nation-wide mobilisation exercise, with soldiers deployed along the Tanjong Pagar railway and live mines being planted. As Singapore's foreign policy is predicated upon having a strong military to deter potential aggressors and to prevent us being threatened militarily, it is therefore imperative that the Singaporean military remains strong and capable of protecting its interests should there be a need to.

However, representatives are reminded that while a powerful military may be an incredibly effective deterrent, an over powerful one may lead to paranoid neighbours more concerned with Singapore's intentions. This could lead to a deterioration of relations between Singapore and Malaysia as they would view us not as collaborators but as potential enemies, resulting in a decrease in willingness to make compromises during negotiations, making it harder for deals to be made and issues to be resolved.

Thus, it is imperative that such shows of force are coupled with an opening of diplomatic channels to ensure that tensions do not escalate. While it is important that Singapore is not presented as weak and unable to defend its own interests, it is also important to not to aggravate neighbours and worsen relations.

Gradual Repudiation of International Organisations

Recent years can be characterised by the re-emergence of populist, nationalistic sentiments in the West such as the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the looming departure of Britain from the European Union. This has come at the expense

of the rules-based liberal order, as politicians with more globalist leanings being elected out in favour of ones with more nationalistic credentials.

With their departure however, comes with the gradual repudiation of the international organisations they had set up when they were ascendant. Organisations like the International Court of Justice and the World Trade Organisation rely upon active enforcement of their decisions and judgements for them to hold any real power and influence in the world or they would serve close to no use at all. However, due to the rise of nationalistic sentiments in the West, the same countries who once created these organisations to foster a more interconnected world are now refusing their responsibilities to defend and uphold the credibility of these organisations, instead choosing to make decisions best for their individual countries (The Economist, 2017). As such, countries are free to disregard the rulings of these organisations without fear of consequences from the rest of the world. These gaps are already apparent, with China choosing to ignore the ruling of the Hague, which was in favour of the Philippines over the issue of sovereignty over the South China Sea with little to no repercussions whatsoever (Perlez, 2016).

Complications then come into Singapore's foreign policy when you take into account Singapore's use of these international organisation to help resolve disputes with Malaysia. The issue of Pedra Branca for instance, was amicably resolved by the ICJ in 2008. However, Singapore has taken for granted Malaysia's adherence to the rulings of the ICJ which is something it can no longer do, given the world's declining interests in upholding the decisions these otherwise powerless organisations make. As much as it is

unlikely that Malaysia ignores a ruling in the near future given their stake in the South China Sea as well, representatives must take into account this growing possibility in their consideration of Singapore's foreign policy moving ahead.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are Malaysia's strategic imperatives in the future, and how can Singapore work around them to ensure bilateral agreements are a "win-win" for both countries?
2. How should Singapore react to potential future posturing and sabre-rattling from Malaysia?
3. How far should Singapore consider the military option to safeguard its interests against a more confrontational Malaysia?

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