

Study on Singapore's Leadership as a Small State and its Role in Global Governance

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ABSTRACT

As globalization deepens, global governance is also rapidly adapting. The shortcomings of the previous model dominated by major powers are gradually being exposed, and the role of smaller countries is gradually coming into focus. Singapore, a Southeast Asian city-state, is a prime example-despite its small size and limited natural resources, it has leveraged its precise positioning and robust governance capabilities to achieve the "brilliance of a small country" in global governance. In promoting trade liberalization, it has helped ASEAN streamline its Free Trade Area cooperation; in addressing climate change, it has established clear emission reduction targets and implemented actions; and in areas such as regional security and public health, its pragmatic participation has consistently yielded tangible results. Singapore's ability to "achieve great results with small means" stems not from traditional power but from identifying the right roles: building strategic alliances to gather strength, focusing on specific issues to establish deep roots, and contributing expertise to partners. Put simply, it serves as a "rule-maker," "bridge coordinator," and "capacity builder," filling gaps in governance left by larger powers, fostering diverse collaboration, and providing a model for other small and medium-sized countries. Of course, shifting geopolitical dynamics and increasingly complex governance issues also present challenges for Singapore. However, its approach to dealing with challenges is quite practical for understanding the value of small countries in the current transformation of global governance.

KEYWORDS

Singapore; Global Governance; Small State Leadership; Role Positioning; Rule-Driven Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Singapore is a classic example of a small or medium-sized country. Despite its small size and limited natural resources, it has established a firm foothold in global governance through its flexible diplomatic approach and expertise. In promoting trade liberalization, it has helped ASEAN connect with multilateral mechanisms. In addressing climate change, it has not only implemented emissions reduction measures but also shared governance experiences. In the field of public health, it has proactively coordinated resources and established collaborative platforms. Singapore's leadership has never relied on traditional power, but rather on serving as a bridge and exporting its capabilities, filling the governance gaps of larger nations while also providing a reference for other small and medium-sized countries. Of course, shifting geopolitical dynamics and increasingly complex governance issues have also presented challenges for Singapore, a fact that is crucial for understanding the value of small countries. Since its independence in 1965, it has developed rapidly within a complex surrounding environment. Not only has its economy flourished, but it has also consistently played a role in regional and global governance. From promoting the entry into force of

the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to advocating for pragmatic emissions reduction solutions at the United Nations Climate Change Conference; from participating in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to coordinating regional security issues to promoting equitable vaccine distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic, Singapore's governance practices demonstrate a unique path for small countries to transcend their size constraints and participate in global affairs. Why has Singapore been able to achieve the "small wins, big gains" effect in global governance? What are the core characteristics and implementation mechanisms of its "small-state leadership"? In the context of the transformation of the global governance system, is Singapore's role positioning facing adjustments, and what lessons can it offer other small and medium-sized countries? Based on this, this article examines Singapore's specific practices in global governance, analyzing the logic behind the formation of its leadership and the practical significance of its role positioning from the perspectives of issue selection, strategic application, and role functions. This article aims to enrich the study of small countries in global governance and provide theoretical and practical references for improving the global governance system of multi-party co-governance.

2. SINGAPORE'S MOTIVATIONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: DUAL DRIVES FROM INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DEMANDS

Singapore's proactive participation in global governance is essentially a necessary response to internal survival pressures and external development needs. The combination of internal and external motivations forms the core logic of its involvement in global affairs. Internally, the "small state dilemma" is the fundamental driving force. As a city-state with a land area of only 734.3 square kilometers and a population of approximately 5.94 million in 2023, Singapore is extremely resource-poor, relying entirely on imports for food and energy. Its economy is highly dependent on external markets-its total foreign trade reached \$1.17 trillion in 2022, 3.2 times its GDP. This export-oriented economy creates a strong demand for a stable and open global governance system. A resurgence of trade protectionism could plunge Singapore's economy into recession; changes to international shipping rules would directly undermine its core competitiveness as a key global entrepot. Therefore, participating in global governance and maintaining multilateral cooperation are essentially a defensive strategy for Singapore to safeguard its own survival and development. Externally, geopolitical pressures and regional responsibilities are the "proactive driving forces." Located at the eastern entrance of the Strait of Malacca, Singapore lies at the geopolitical core of Southeast Asia. Its neighboring countries have significant historical, cultural, and religious differences, resulting in a complex regional security environment. Within the ASEAN framework, as an economically developed member, Singapore must promote regional governance cooperation to create a stable surrounding environment. At the same time, deepening globalization has magnified the impact of global issues on Singapore. For example, rising sea levels caused by climate change pose a direct threat to Singapore, a low-lying country. A 2019 UN IPCC report indicated that a 1-meter sea-level rise would submerge 12% of Singapore's land[1]. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global supply chains, leading to a 4.7% decline in Singapore's manufacturing output in the first quarter of 2020. This forced Singapore to break free from its "small country limitations" and instead rely on participating in global governance, transforming external risks into opportunities to enhance its governance influence. Furthermore, cultivating an international image and enhancing soft power are also key priorities for Singapore. As a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation, it has sought to establish an international reputation for "efficiency, rule of law, and inclusiveness" since its independence. Participating in global governance is a key way to export its governance ideas and enhance its voice. For example, at the UN Human Rights Council, Singapore's advocacy for "priority development rights" resonated strongly with the needs of developing countries. This not only gave it greater weight among developing countries but also garnered greater support. This synergy between "internal needs and external actions" gives Singapore's participation in global governance both

urgency and long-term considerations, laying the foundation for its subsequent demonstration of "small-state leadership."

3. TRADE LIBERALIZATION: A RULE PROMOTER AND DEFENDER OF MULTILATERAL MECHANISMS

Currently, global trade governance is turbulent, unilateralism continues to disrupt the situation, and regional trade agreements are becoming fragmented. However, Singapore has always firmly supported free trade and has become a key "rule-maker" in promoting global trade liberalization. Its actions are primarily focused on maintaining the multilateral trading system and integrating regional agreements, a distinctive characteristic.

In upholding the multilateral trading system, Singapore has always used the WTO as a core platform and has proactively sought solutions to the challenges of WTO reform. Previously, some major powers had obstructed the proper functioning of the Appellate Body of the WTO dispute settlement mechanism. In 2019, Singapore, along with the European Union, Canada, and others, launched the Multiparty Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), providing WTO members with an alternative avenue for resolving trade disputes. As of 2023, it has accepted eight trade dispute cases, effectively alleviating the paralysis crisis facing the WTO dispute settlement mechanism. Furthermore, within the WTO framework, Singapore continues to advocate for the principles of non-discrimination and transparency, firmly opposing trade protectionism. At the 2022 WTO Ministerial Conference, Singapore, speaking on behalf of developing countries, facilitated the adoption of the Ministerial Declaration on the Urgent Response to the Food Security Crisis, which suspended some restrictive food export measures[2]. This ensured the stability of the global food supply chain and established Singapore as a core force in the WTO as a "coordinator for small and medium-sized countries." In promoting regional trade agreements, Singapore has promoted the integration and upgrading of trade rules through a "bilateral-regional" linkage strategy, providing a "regional model." In 2003, it signed the first Comprehensive Economic Partnership (EPA) with Japan, setting a precedent for high-level regional trade agreements. In 2009, it facilitated the signing of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA) between ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand, covering 12 countries and 650 million people, making it the largest regional trade agreement in Southeast Asia at the time. During the RCEP negotiations, Singapore played a bridging role: as the most economically developed country with the most comprehensive rules within ASEAN, it not only coordinated diverging interests within ASEAN and promoted the opening of services trade in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, but also engaged with China, Japan, and South Korea to forge consensus on issues such as intellectual property protection and e-commerce rules. After the RCEP entered into force in 2022, Singapore became one of the fastest-growing members within the agreement, with trade with RCEP partner countries accounting for 61% of the total in 2023, demonstrating the value of regional trade agreements. It is worth noting that Singapore prioritizes inclusiveness and adaptability in its trade liberalization efforts. In e-commerce, it advocates for rules that balance cross-border data flows and data security, balancing the development of the digital economy with the data sovereignty of developing countries. In the services trade sector, it promotes a "negative list" management model to reduce market access adjustment costs for developing countries. This pragmatic and inclusive approach has earned Singapore the support of both developed and developing countries, significantly enhancing its leadership in trade liberalization.

4. CLIMATE CHANGE RESPONSE: PRAGMATIC ACTORS AND CAPACITY BUILDERS

In climate change governance, small and medium-sized countries often participate passively due to limited resources. However, Singapore, through pragmatic actions, international collaboration, and

capacity building, has demonstrated the leadership of a small country by proactively leading, becoming a bridge connecting developed and developing countries. Regarding domestic emissions reduction, despite its advanced industry and shipping (total carbon emissions reached 51.5 million tons in 2021, or 8.7 tons per capita), Singapore adheres to the principle of "pragmatism and feasibility." The "Singapore Green Blueprint 2030," released in 2022, sets clear goals: a 30% reduction in carbon emissions intensity by 2030 compared to 2019 levels, and achieving net zero emissions by 2050. Regarding energy transition, the country plans to reach 1.5 GW of installed solar capacity by 2030 and build a liquefied natural gas (LNG) receiving terminal. By 2023, natural gas accounted for 96% of energy consumption. Regarding industrial upgrading, the country promotes low-carbon transformation in energy-intensive industries. For example, ExxonMobil launched a carbon capture and storage project in 2023, which will reduce carbon emissions by 1 million tons annually and provide a replicable low-carbon solution for small and medium-sized countries[3].

In international collaboration, Singapore focuses on "multilateral-regional" collaboration. At the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP), as a member of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), Singapore joined India, Brazil, and others in promoting the "Loss and Damage Fund" agreement at COP27 in 2022. At COP28 in 2023, Singapore advocated for "diversified climate finance," pushing multilateral development banks to increase lending for low-carbon projects in developing countries. Regionally, Singapore led the establishment of the ASEAN Climate Finance Platform in 2021, which raised \$500 million by 2023 to support projects such as solar power plants in Thailand and wind power in Vietnam.

Capacity building is a key focus for Singapore. The Climate Action Capacity Building Programme (CACBP) was launched in 2020 to support developing countries in Southeast Asia and Africa. By 2023, it will have held workshops such as "Low-Carbon City Planning," training over 1,200 officials and technicians from 45 countries. The programme will also support Cambodia's Nationally Determined Contribution update, helping it increase its 2030 emissions reduction target by 15%. Furthermore, it will be developing demonstration projects such as community solar projects in Malaysia. This "teaching a man to fish" model not only enhances the response capabilities of developing countries but also positions Singapore as a crucial "link" in global climate governance.

5. REGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION: BRIDGE COORDINATOR AND TRUST BUILDER

Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape is complex, with the influence of major powers intertwined. Regional security issues persist. ASEAN, as the core of regional security cooperation, is constrained by insufficient coordination capacity. Singapore, leveraging its neutral diplomatic stance and effective coordination, has played the role of "bridge coordinator" and "trust builder," promoting security dialogue and easing regional tensions[4].

In terms of internal ASEAN coordination, Singapore is working to address the inefficiency of consensus-based decision-making. In response to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)'s inability to reach resolution, Singapore, during its 2021 chairmanship, identified cybersecurity and transnational crime as core issues, promoting the "ARF Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation." In 2023, it jointly proposed the "ARF Practical Cooperation Action Plan" with Indonesia and Thailand to establish a transnational crime intelligence sharing mechanism. This plan led to the dismantling of 12 drug trafficking gangs and the seizure of drugs worth \$120 million that year. At the same time, within the framework of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), efforts will be made to establish a working group on defense industry cooperation to foster defense technology collaboration among member states and reduce reliance on external security.

In ASEAN's dialogues with major powers, Singapore is building a "bridge of communication." Faced with Sino-US strategic competition and pressure from Southeast Asian countries to choose sides,

Singapore will promote the 2022 "US-ASEAN Security Dialogue" to facilitate communication on issues such as the South China Sea situation. In 2023, it will sign "Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreements" with China and the US, respectively, deepening cooperation with China in areas such as humanitarian assistance, including joint rescue exercises. Furthermore, it will promote the development of the Shangri-La Dialogue, attracting over 30 defense ministers in 2023 to provide a platform for Sino-US defense ministerial talks and to ease military tensions.

In responding to non-traditional security issues, Singapore is promoting operational transformation through "pragmatic cooperation." The ASEAN Counter-Terrorism Information Sharing Centre (launched in 2016) was established and, by 2023, had collected over 2,000 pieces of intelligence and thwarted over 30 terrorist attacks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ASEAN established the ASEAN Public Health Emergency Response Mechanism, donated 120 million masks and 500 ventilators to ASEAN from 2020 to 2022, and trained 15,000 medical personnel, effectively becoming a "core coordinator" of regional security[5].

6. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES FACING SINGAPORE'S "SMALL STATE LEADERSHIP"

Singapore's "small state leadership" in global governance is facing multiple internal and external challenges. These challenges stem from the inherent resource limitations of small states, as well as the impact of the transformation of the global governance system and shifting geopolitical dynamics, directly impacting its role and influence. From an internal perspective, the core issues lie in resource constraints and the "ceiling effect" of governance capacity. Singapore's economy is highly dependent on external markets, making global economic fluctuations easily transmitted domestically, thereby weakening its ability to participate in regional cooperation. Singapore's economy is overly dependent on external markets. Fluctuations in the global economy are immediately felt domestically, weakening even its ability to invest in regional cooperation. Key resources like energy are entirely imported, and fluctuations in international resource prices hinder progress in related domestic governance. With a small population, Singapore already lacks specialized talent, especially in the field of international governance. This shortage prevents it from independently developing comprehensive solutions to global issues, often requiring collaboration with others. In areas requiring technical support, innovation is limited due to the small size of its teams. Domestic political pressure is also gradually emerging, with some suggesting that investment in overseas governance should be reduced to prioritize improving domestic livelihoods. This forces the government to carefully balance overseas investment with domestic needs when promoting international governance. There are two primary external challenges: a shifting geopolitical landscape and the increasing complexity of global governance issues. As strategic competition among major powers in the region intensifies, Singapore's long-held "great power balancing" strategy is shrinking, and it often faces implicit pressure to "take sides" among major powers[6]. This pressure could not only affect its cooperative relationships with different major powers but also constrain its autonomy in areas such as regional economic coordination. At the same time, global governance issues are developing in the direction of "fragmentation" and "specialization". Traditional issues have not yet been resolved, and digital governance and security in emerging fields are becoming more and more complex. New issues continue to emerge. Singapore's governance strengths are primarily concentrated in traditional areas. When faced with new issues, its limited technical and policy expertise makes it difficult to propose globally influential rules and regulations, significantly increasing its participation. More crucially, the fundamental structure of global governance remains largely unchanged, and Singapore's "small-state leadership" clearly faces the risk of relying on others. On many global issues, the cooperative mechanisms and ideas promoted by Singapore rely on financial support, resources, and influence from major powers. If major powers adjust their strategies or reduce their support, relevant governance initiatives may falter. Because it is too dependent on big countries, Singapore's "small country leadership" lacks resilience and appears very fragile, unable to function stably all the time.

7. CONCLUSION

This article analyzes Singapore's global governance practices, clarifying the logic behind the formation and role characteristics of small-state leadership, and can help us understand the value of small states in the transformation of global governance.

The study finds that Singapore's "small-state leadership" relies not on traditional power but on identifying its niche and selecting the right strategies, achieving "big wins with small size." In the trade sector, it is a "rule-maker," maintaining trade openness by upholding the WTO and integrating regional agreements. In addressing climate change, it is both a "pragmatic actor" and a "capacity builder," using domestic emissions reductions and international collaboration to help developing countries enhance their response capabilities. In regional security cooperation, it serves as a "bridge coordinator" and "trust builder," promoting security dialogue within ASEAN and with other countries, thereby easing regional tensions. The core of this positioning is to focus on areas of strength, address governance shortcomings of larger states, and build a diverse network of collaboration, transforming "small state disadvantages" into "governance advantages." The research also highlights the challenges it faces: limited internal resources, economic dependence on external factors, and talent shortages, which constrain long-term governance investment; intensified external competition between China and the United States, which compresses the space for "great power balancing"; increasingly specialized and complex global governance issues, making participation more challenging; and reliance on larger states, which makes leadership "fragile." This demonstrates that small states need to "coordinate internal and external forces" to exercise leadership: strengthening domestic governance and reducing external dependence, while also flexibly responding to geopolitical changes and finding "neutral collaborative spaces," and focusing on issues of strength to avoid distraction. From the perspective of the transformation of global governance, Singapore's practice offers important insights: First, global governance is not exclusive to major powers. Small and medium-sized countries, through precise positioning, can play an irreplaceable role in specific areas, filling the gaps in governance gaps faced by major powers. Second, small and medium-sized countries should work together, leveraging regional organizations and multilateral mechanisms to pool resources and enhance their voice. Third, global governance requires "multi-party governance," and major powers should respect the concerns of small and medium-sized countries and provide them with more opportunities for participation. Going forward, Singapore needs to adjust its role: deepen collaboration in areas of traditional strength, and accelerate capacity building in emerging areas to find breakthroughs. Other small and medium-sized countries can learn from its experience, select appropriate topics and strategies tailored to their national circumstances, and jointly promote fairer, more efficient, and inclusive global governance.

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