Small-state realism

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The doctrine of vulnerability

Singapore's foreign policy rests on a sober view of its own position. The island has no strategic depth, imports much of its water, food and energy, and lies between two larger neighbours with which it has had difficult moments. Michael Leifer, the leading scholar of its foreign policy, described its diplomacy as an exercise in "coping with vulnerability".[1] The phrase captures a constant feature: Singapore's leaders have never treated the state's existence as self-evident.

Lee Kuan Yew gave the doctrine its best-known image. In a speech at the University of Singapore in 1966, he quoted the Chinese saying that big fish eat small fish and small fish eat shrimps. Some shrimps, he added, are poisonous: "If you eat them, you will get digestive upsets."[2] Singapore, he argued, should be such a shrimp. The image has served for six decades to justify a defence effort unusual for a state of its size. Conscription, a well-equipped air force and close cooperation with outside powers make any attack costly, while the state renounces any ambition to threaten its neighbours.

Deterrence and defence arrangements

Deterrence was accompanied by arrangements that tied outside powers to the region's stability. When Britain decided to withdraw its forces east of Suez, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom created the Five Power Defence Arrangements, which came into effect on 1 November 1971.[3] The arrangements are consultative and impose no obligation to intervene. Their value lies in keeping five states in regular military contact and in linking the defence of Singapore and Malaysia to each other.

The relationship with the United States developed on a similar logic of access without alliance. A memorandum of understanding of 1990 gave American forces access to Singapore's facilities. After a Strategic Framework Agreement in 2005, the two governments extended the memorandum in September 2019 by fifteen years to 2035.[4][5] Singapore's leaders have stated repeatedly that these arrangements do not make it an ally of the United States. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said so publicly in 2022, a statement his successor Lawrence Wong repeated in 2024.[6]

International law as the shield of the weak

A small state has a particular interest in a world governed by rules. Singapore's diplomats have therefore invested heavily in international law, both as negotiators and as litigants. Tommy Koh,

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permanent representative to the United Nations from 1968 to 1971, presided over the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea from 1980 to 1982.[7] The resulting convention secured freedom of navigation through straits used for international shipping, a matter of direct concern to a port on the Strait of Malacca.

Singapore has also submitted its own disputes to international courts. Its sovereignty claim to Pedra Branca, an island at the eastern entrance of the Singapore Strait, was contested by Malaysia. The two states agreed on 6 February 2003 to refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice. In its judgment of 23 May 2008, the court awarded Pedra Branca to Singapore by twelve votes to four and Middle Rocks to Malaysia.[8] Both governments accepted the outcome. The case demonstrated that neighbours with a history of friction could resolve a territorial dispute by law, which is the same message that Singapore's courts and arbitration centre send to commercial parties (see Chapters F.II and F.III).

Coalitions of the small

Realism about power leaves room for initiative, because a small state can multiply its weight by working with others in the same position. In 1992 Singapore founded the Forum of Small States at the United Nations, an informal grouping that now counts 108 members.[9] In 2009, when the Group of Twenty became the main forum for global economic coordination, Singapore convened the Global Governance Group of some thirty smaller states, which seeks to give non-members a voice in the G20 process.[10]

These coalitions matter for the financial centre because the rules of international finance are increasingly written in clubs. The G20 sets the agenda of the Financial Stability Board, endorses the work of the Financial Action Task Force and commissions OECD standards on tax transparency. A state outside the club risks having rules imposed on it without a hearing. Singapore's repeated invitations to G20 summits as a guest gave it a seat at the table where the post-2008 regulatory reforms and the global standards on tax information exchange were shaped (see Chapter E.II).[11]

Lee Hsien Loong summarised the doctrine at the Shangri-La Dialogue of 31 May 2019. Small states, he said, "can do little to influence the big powers, but we are not entirely without agency".[12] Agency, in this sense, means building coalitions, upholding rules and making oneself useful to all sides. The same speech warned against initiatives that would force countries to take sides between the United States and China. It is the clearest statement of the balance that Singapore has tried to keep since the 2010s.

Common misconception

Singapore is often described as Asia's Switzerland and assumed to be neutral. It has no neutral status in international law and does not claim one. It maintains defence arrangements with the United States and four Commonwealth partners, takes positions on questions of international law and imposed its own sanctions on Russia in 2022. Singapore seeks consistency: the same principles applied to all states, large or small, so that partners on every side can predict its conduct. For clients of the financial centre,

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this consistency is worth more than formal neutrality, since it extends to the application of financial regulation and sanctions.

Notes

1. Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability*, London, Routledge, 2000.
2. Mothership, "S'pore must be a 'poisonous shrimp' to survive in a world of 'big fish', LKY said in 1966", December 2018 (mothership.sg): Lee cited the saying "Big fish eat small fish; small fish eat shrimps" in a 1966 speech at the University of Singapore and observed that some shrimps are poisonous: "If you eat them, you will get digestive upsets."
3. Wikipedia, "Five Power Defence Arrangements" (accessed November 2026): arrangements founded on 1 November 1971 following a joint communiqué of 16 April 1971; members Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom; no specific commitment to intervene militarily, members consult in the event of an armed attack or threat against Malaysia or Singapore.
4. Wikipedia, "Singapore–United States relations" (accessed November 2026): renewal on 23 September 2019 by Lee Hsien Loong and Donald Trump of the defence pact allowing US forces to use Singapore's air and naval bases, extended by fifteen years to 2035; littoral combat ships rotationally deployed to Changi Naval Base under the Strategic Framework Agreement.
5. Memorandum of Understanding between Singapore and the United States of 13 November 1990 on US use of facilities in Singapore, and Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defence and Security of 12 July 2005.
6. Wikipedia, "Singapore–United States relations" (accessed November 2026): statement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on 1 April 2022 that "Singapore is not an ally of the U.S.", reiterated by Lawrence Wong in 2024.
7. Wikipedia, "Tommy Koh" (accessed November 2026): Permanent Representative to the United Nations 1968–1971, President of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea 1980–1982, chairman of the Main Committee of the UN Conference on Environment and Development 1990–1992, chief negotiator of the US–Singapore Free Trade Agreement.
8. International Court of Justice, *Sovereignty over Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Puteh, Middle Rocks and South Ledge (Malaysia/Singapore)*, Judgment of 23 May 2008, case page (icj-cij.org, accessed November 2026): sovereignty over Pedra Branca/Pulau Batu Puteh to Singapore, Middle Rocks to Malaysia, South Ledge to the state in whose territorial waters it lies; Wikipedia, "Pedra Branca dispute" (accessed November 2026): special agreement signed at Putrajaya on 6 February 2003; ICJ judgment of 23 May 2008 awarding sovereignty over Pedra Branca to Singapore by 12 votes to 4 and Middle Rocks to Malaysia by 15 votes to 1; both governments accepted the outcome.
9. Wikipedia, "Forum of Small States" (accessed November 2026): formed on 1 October 1992, founded and chaired by Singapore, 108 member states, a forum for small states to promote their economic interests.
10. Wikipedia, "Global Governance Group" (accessed November 2026): formed in July 2009, founded by Singapore, 30 member countries, with the aim of channelling the views of smaller states into the G20.
11. Invitations of Singapore to G20 summits as a non-member guest (among them Seoul 2010 and several summits from 2013).
12. Prime Minister's Office Singapore, "PM Lee Hsien Loong at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2019" (pmo.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): "Small states like Singapore can do little to influence the big powers, but we are not entirely without agency"; Asian countries "want to be friends with both" the United States and China; Singapore opposes initiatives that "force countries to take sides" or "create rival blocs".

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