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At Home and Abroad: Singapore's Way Forward

By Tang Meng Kit

SYNOPSIS

This commentary discusses how Singapore balances a realist foreign policy with evolving domestic expectations. As global pressures intensify and citizens call for greater inclusivity and reform, Singapore must adapt without losing its strengths. The paper argues for gradual renewal to ensure continuing resilience, legitimacy, and international relevance.

COMMENTARY

Singapore's journey has always been defined by a paradox. As a small, vulnerable, and resource-scarce city-state, it has long balanced existential fears with a strong ambition to thrive on the world stage. From *Konfrontasi* with Indonesia and separation from Malaysia to Cold War manoeuvrings, its history is one of survival through strategic ingenuity and disciplined governance. In navigating an evolving global order and rising domestic expectations, Singapore has adopted a dual-track strategy: a realist foreign policy to ensure security and relevance, and a constructivist domestic policy to shape national identity, cohesion, and resilience.

With the 4th Generation leadership led by Prime Minister Lawrence Wong in place, and an increasingly engaged electorate, a key question arises: Can Singapore sustain this model without becoming irrelevant abroad or disconnected at home? Today's challenge is not about preserving the past per se but adapting it, i.e., maintaining global relevance while renewing the social contract, to meet the country's evolving needs.

Foreign Policy Realism

Singapore's foreign policy has always been underpinned by realist principles. A deep-

seated “siege mentality” born from its vulnerable geography and lack of strategic depth has compelled it to pursue strategic autonomy. From building a credible defence force to forging ties across ideological divides, Singapore’s realism is not cold opportunism but calibrated vigilance.

Singapore’s hosting of the 2015 Xi-Ma summit and the 2018 Trump-Kim meeting exemplifies this: not power projection but diplomatic agility. Despite uncomfortable hiccups in external relations, such as China’s seizure of its Terrex armoured vehicles in 2016, Singapore has not deviated from asserting its sovereignty when challenged, while maintaining open channels with all countries, big or small.

Singapore’s agreement with South Korea to upgrade their bilateral ties to a strategic partnership in 2025 and its continuing balancing act in the South China Sea demonstrate a steady hand in navigating regional rivalries. Similarly, the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone launched in January 2025 shows Singapore’s ability to convert geopolitical complexity into mutual opportunity, reinforcing regional stability.

Such realism has yielded dividends. Singapore enjoys top global rankings in governance and business competitiveness and is frequently cited as a model of “pragmatic idealism”. But challenges remain. Singapore’s stand on the Israel-Gaza war drew criticism from segments of its Muslim community. Meanwhile, the US-China rivalry occasionally puts Singapore’s relations with Beijing and Washington to the test. The strategic space for Singapore’s balancing act is becoming increasingly constricted.

Constructivist Domestic Policy

Singapore has long relied on constructivist tools to engineer unity and resilience at home. Nation-building has not been left to chance. Policies like the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system, the Ethnic Integration Policy, and national service are designed to cultivate a common identity, even if some see these as instruments of control.

School syllabi, housing policies, and public messaging have reinforced meritocracy, multiracialism, and self-reliance narratives. Values education and campaigns like the “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, much emphasised in earlier years, reflect a deep commitment to shaping behaviour and beliefs.

However, in recent years, we have seen more visible contestation. Youth-led activism and campaigns for environmental justice, LGBTQ+ rights, and migrant welfare suggest a society gradually outgrowing the boundaries set by older paradigms. “Pink Dot” events continue to draw thousands despite regulatory constraints. Civil society attracted passionate advocates for a growing agenda of political, economic and social issues to have a more inclusive nation regardless of race, language and religion.

Policy has responded, albeit gradually. The public backlash against the 2013 Population White Paper prompted shifts in immigration policy. Budget 2025 revealed an increasing focus on social inclusion, with greater investments in healthcare, climate

transition, and early childhood support. The government is moving, but always on its own terms.

Foreign-Domestic Feedback Loop

Singapore's twin-track strategy is not a coincidence – it is a feedback loop. Its foreign policy relies on internal cohesion, and its domestic legitimacy is often reinforced through external reference. The threat of terrorism or global competition, for instance, is used to justify stringent media controls or the continuing reliance on the Internal Security Act.

The result is what some scholars term “pragmatic idealism” – a blend of outward realism and inward engineering. It has served the country well. But the risk lies in overreach. When the state is both umpire and player in all domains, trust can erode. The People's Action Party's (PAP) long grip on power has garnered wonder abroad, but growing demands for reform at home.

The 2025 General Election underscored Singapore's evolving political landscape. The PAP retained its parliamentary majority and increased its vote share to 65.6 per cent, securing 87 out of 97 seats. The Workers' Party maintained its 10 elected seats, reaffirming its role as the leading opposition party. These results reflect an electorate that values stability but also seeks credible alternative voices and greater institutional responsiveness.

The Reform Imperative: Charting a Responsive Path Forward

Singapore's success has been built on adaptive governance, not static formulae. As global volatility deepens, from AI disruptions to climate pressures and geopolitical uncertainty, the need for a responsive government becomes even more vital.

National Budget 2025 and the Forward Singapore exercise (2022-24) have opened channels for more participatory policymaking. There is now greater acknowledgement of the need to invest in areas such as sustainability, mental health, and social equity. But more can be done.

Democratic responsiveness does not mean populism. It means building a deeper compact of trust through reforms that protect free expression, enhance electoral competitiveness, and ensure that policy decisions are transparent and accountable. Electoral reforms such as having more Single-Member Constituencies, lowering candidates' deposits in standing for election, and establishing an independent elections commission could help to level the playing field. A Freedom of Information Act and independent oversight bodies would improve transparency. Socially, a universal safety net, inclusive education, and healthcare reforms would address new anxieties.

What is essential is that reform is seen not as a concession, but as continuity in deepening the very principles that have underpinned Singapore's rise: adaptability, pragmatism, and strategic foresight.

Maintaining Balance While Moving Forward

Singapore's story has always been one of delicate balance. It is the lion city not for its size, but for its ability to punch above its weight, externally and domestically. The dual strategy of realism abroad and constructivism at home has delivered peace, prosperity, and international respect. However, as society evolves and the external environment becomes more complex and formidable, the terms of this strategy must evolve too.

The solution is not to abandon the model but to refine it to meet the demands of a more vocal, diverse, and connected citizenry. Moving forward means not clinging to old certainties but trusting the capacity of the electorate and institutions to advance national interest and survival. Singapore's next chapter will be defined not by resisting change, but by steering expectations and policy constructively and strategically.

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