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Truong Thi Hue

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Strategic Realism and Global Engagement: Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's International Thinking

Truong Thi Hue

¹ Duy Tan University, Da Nang, Vietnam

Abstract

Singapore's unique geopolitical context has long necessitated a foreign policy grounded in pragmatism, strategic foresight, and a deep understanding of global dynamics. Among Singapore's leaders, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stands out for his nuanced international thinking, which balances realism with multilateral engagement, and national interests with global responsibilities. This paper explores the key themes of Lee Hsien Loong's worldview, including globalization, China's rise, the importance of the United States, and regional cooperation, and examines how these have shaped Singapore's foreign policy. Through a qualitative analysis of public speeches, interviews, and secondary literature, the article provides a comprehensive assessment of Lee's international outlook, arguing that it represents a strategic synthesis of small-state survivalism and liberal internationalism.

Key Words

Lee Hsien Loong, internationalism, cooperation, interest, globalization.

1. Introduction

Singapore, a small island state situated at the crossroads of major maritime trade routes in Southeast Asia, has always confronted existential questions about its survival, independence, and relevance. As former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew observed, the city-state exists in a “friendly but not always benign neighborhood,” and thus its leaders must constantly adapt to a volatile and complex global environment (Lee, 2008). In this context, the international thinking of its third Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, offers valuable insights into how a small state can maintain sovereignty, promote prosperity, and exert influence beyond its size.

Lee Hsien Loong assumed office in 2004, during a period marked by intense globalization and rising geopolitical competition. Over two decades, he has steered Singapore through the 2008 global financial crisis, the rise of China, growing US-China rivalry, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout these challenges, his foreign policy pronouncements and decisions have reflected a consistent strategic logic rooted in global engagement, multilateralism, and a balance-of-power approach.

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's international thinking. It begins with a literature review on small state foreign policy and Singaporean diplomatic strategy, followed by an outline of the qualitative methodology used to assess Lee's worldview. The core of the article analyzes key themes in Lee's international perspectives, including globalization, China, the United States, multilateral institutions, and the rules-based international order. It concludes by reflecting on the significance of Lee's thinking for Singapore's future and for small state diplomacy in an increasingly multipolar world.

*CORRESPONDENCE Truong Thi Hue | truongthihuedtuvn@gmail.com | Duy Tan University, Da Nang, Vietnam.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Small State Foreign Policy

Scholarly debates on small state foreign policy emphasize the structural vulnerabilities that constrain their actions, such as limited military capability, dependence on trade, and minimal bargaining power in global institutions (Ingebritsen, 2006; Hey, 2003). In response, small states often adopt strategies of norm entrepreneurship, multilateralism, strategic alignment, and economic diplomacy to punch above their weight (Thorhallsson, 2012).

Singapore exemplifies these strategies. As a small, open economy with no natural resources, Singapore has consistently aligned itself with international norms and institutions. Its diplomacy is characterized by pragmatism, legalism, and a strong commitment to ASEAN and global trade regimes.

2.2. Continuity in Singaporean Foreign Policy

Since independence in 1965, Singapore's foreign policy has been guided by consistent principles: neutrality in great power rivalry, strategic alignment with the United States, and support for regional multilateralism (Tan, 2016). Lee Kuan Yew's realist philosophy laid the groundwork, emphasizing military deterrence, economic competitiveness, and diplomatic agility (Lee, 2008).

Goh Chok Tong emphasized a more consultative and economically dynamic approach, reinforcing ties with ASEAN and deepening relations with China. Under Lee Hsien Loong, this legacy has continued but adapted to new realities: US retreat from global leadership, China's assertiveness, and uncertainties in global governance.

2.3. Studies on Lee Hsien Loong's International Thinking

While much literature discusses Singapore's overall foreign policy, specific studies on Lee Hsien Loong's worldview are relatively limited. See Seng Tan (2016) analyzes Lee's emphasis on ASEAN centrality and the US role in Asia, noting his cautious optimism regarding China. Ian Bremmer (2016) and Wang Dong (2015) provide insights into Lee's frustrations with American inconsistency and his calls for a more stable, rules-based order. Primary sources such as Lee's speeches at the Shangri-La Dialogue and interviews with PBS and Time magazine serve as valuable materials for reconstructing his international thinking.

Despite these contributions, there is a lack of integrated analysis that scientifically examines Lee's views across multiple themes. This article addresses this gap through a structured thematic evaluation of his global outlook.

3. Methods

This study employs qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary sources to identify and synthesize the main components of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's international thinking. Primary sources include public speeches, interviews, and official statements made by Lee Hsien Loong between 2001 and 2024. Notable among these are his remarks at the Shangri-La Dialogue, interviews with international media (e.g., PBS, Time), and policy statements issued by the Prime Minister's Office of Singapore. Secondary sources include scholarly publications, policy analyses, and biographical accounts by academics such as See Seng Tan, Wang Dong, and Ian Bremmer, along with institutional reports and journal articles related to Singapore's foreign policy.

Thematic coding was applied to categorize Lee's statements into key areas of international engagement, such as globalization, regional cooperation, US-China relations, and multilateralism. This approach allows for a comprehensive and comparative analysis of recurring themes and their evolution over time.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Globalization and National Identity

In a 2001 interview titled “Maintaining a Singaporean Identity in a Global Economy,” then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong articulated a core tension shaping his international thinking: the need to embrace globalization while preserving Singapore's national identity (Lee, 2001). His remarks reflect a strategic understanding of the 21st-century global landscape, where economic interdependence is inevitable, but sociocultural cohesion remains essential for long-term stability and success.

Lee contended that globalization should not be viewed as an existential threat but as an opportunity requiring careful calibration. “We have to be cosmopolitan,” he stated, “but we also have to know who we are” (Lee, 2001). This dual imperative—being outward-looking yet firmly rooted in one's cultural core—captures a recurring theme in Lee's speeches and policy pronouncements: strategic realism blended with a deep appreciation of societal foundations. Under his guidance, Singapore adopted a posture of economic openness while reinforcing internal mechanisms to preserve social harmony and cultural confidence.

Central to Lee's outlook is the belief that economic survival in a globalized world demands not only participation but active shaping of global flows-of capital, talent, and ideas. However, such openness brings risks, including identity dilution, increasing inequality, and weakening social bonds. To counteract these, Lee advocated robust domestic institutions and national policies designed to strengthen a cohesive Singaporean ethos. Three pillars stand out:

- 1. Education:** Lee emphasizes education as a tool for global competitiveness and instilling national values and civic consciousness. As he noted in a 2003 speech, “We must develop a strong national identity... while preparing our youth to face the challenges of a globalized world” (Lee, 2003).
- 2. National Service (NS):** Mandatory conscription serves as a rite of passage and nation-building tool. Lee saw NS as vital for unifying society and fostering shared responsibility and social resilience. In his 2010 National Day Rally, he remarked, “NS is one way we hold together as one people... It gives every generation a common experience” (Lee, 2010).
- 3. Multiculturalism:** Singapore maintains a proactive model of multicultural management through policies like ethnic integration in public housing and bilingual education. Lee regularly reiterated that multiculturalism is not merely a domestic principle but a strategic asset enabling Singapore to navigate a pluralistic and interconnected world (Lee, 2007).

Lee's strategic thinking resists simple dichotomies between globalism and nationalism. Instead, he promotes a nuanced approach where globalization is harnessed for national benefit while deliberate efforts strengthen identity and cohesion. As Tan (2012) notes, Lee's philosophy reflects “pragmatic internationalism” that avoids ideological extremes, ensuring Singapore remains globally relevant and domestically grounded.

This balancing act has enabled Singapore to maintain high levels of global integration—consistently ranking among the world's most open economies—without succumbing to centrifugal forces that have challenged many societies in the globalization era. Lee's leadership exemplifies how a small state can exercise agency in a globalized world by aligning its international posture with internal resilience.

4.2. The Rise of China: Opportunity and Challenge

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's views on China's rise are rooted in strategic realism recognizing both immense opportunities and profound challenges posed by Beijing's growing influence. His thinking carefully navigates managing relations with an emerging great power while securing the interests and autonomy of small states like Singapore.

From the outset, Lee acknowledged China as a vital economic partner for Singapore and ASEAN. China's integration into the global economy, especially after joining the WTO in 2001, catalyzed growth across Asia. In numerous speeches, Lee referred to China as a “key engine of regional and global growth,” emphasizing engagement through trade, investment, and connectivity initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Lee, 2015; 2017).

Yet, Lee has not shied away from expressing Singapore's-and ASEAN's-concerns over China's geopolitical behavior. A consistent theme in his public remarks is the need for China to rise within international norms and respect for sovereignty. In his 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue speech, Lee stated, “A rising China should not undermine the rules-based order that has benefitted all countries, including China itself” (Lee, 2016). He warned that perceived attempts by China to impose its will, especially in disputed areas like the South China Sea, could provoke mistrust and instability.

Singapore's position on the South China Sea dispute reflects this balancing act. While not a claimant, Singapore has repeatedly called for peaceful resolution in accordance with international law, particularly the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Lee stressed that smaller states have a stake in the sanctity of international law and that “might is not right” (Lee, 2019). He encouraged ASEAN to maintain unity and coherence, cautioning that fragmentation weakens the bloc's ability to manage its strategic environment.

Moreover, Lee's approach reveals a broader vision of great power relations in Asia. He has often noted that mismanaged competition between China and the US could be destructive. Rather than taking sides, Singapore under Lee advocates inclusive regional architecture allowing both powers to cooperate. As he told *The New York Times*, “We are friends with both [China and the US]. We would like to maintain good relations with both” (Lee, 2020).

Lee also understands that navigating China's rise requires long-term strategic, institutional, and psychological adaptation. Domestically, Singapore has invested in education, technological innovation, and defense modernization to ensure resilience. Regionally, Lee supports multilateral initiatives strengthening collective agency among smaller states, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and ASEAN-led forums.

In sum, Lee's perspective on China reflects engagement and hedging-a posture shaped by historical experience, geopolitical prudence, and a desire to maintain regional autonomy. Chong (2021) observes Lee exemplifies “a small-state strategist who seeks not to resist China's rise, but to shape the environment in which that rise takes place.”

4.3. The United States: Strategic Anchor in Asia

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has consistently articulated Singapore's position that a robust and sustained US presence in the Asia-Pacific is vital to regional stability, economic growth, and strategic balance. His approach is rooted in what may be described as strategic realism-an appreciation of power dynamics coupled with a pragmatic commitment to multilateralism and international rules.

At the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Lee stated unequivocally that “the United States remains the dominant Pacific power,” emphasizing that its forward-deployed military presence, particularly the US Seventh Fleet, is a stabilizing force that underwrites freedom of navigation and deters adventurism in the South China Sea (Tan, 2016). His speech reflected Singapore's long-standing view that the US security umbrella provides a crucial counterweight to regional uncertainties and the rise of other powers, particularly China.

However, Lee has also been forthright in his critique of US strategic inconsistency and its failure at times to match rhetoric with action. In a candid 2016 interview with *Time* magazine, he expressed disappointment over the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific

Partnership (TPP), a move that he argued undermined US credibility and left a vacuum in regional economic leadership. “How can anyone believe in you anymore?” he reportedly asked, voicing the frustration of smaller states that rely on stable, rules-based economic arrangements (Calabresi, 2016).

Lee's remarks highlight a critical tension in US foreign policy: while Washington remains a security guarantor, its political volatility and domestic divisions can weaken its long-term commitments. In contrast, Lee noted, China offers consistent, tangible incentives through mechanisms such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and direct bilateral aid. These tools, although not without geopolitical strings, have given Beijing an edge in projecting influence across Southeast Asia (Chong, 2019).

Despite these challenges, Lee has repeatedly affirmed that the US remains an irreplaceable strategic anchor in Asia. Yet for its role to be sustainable and credible, he argues, American security guarantees must be matched by sustained economic and diplomatic engagement. In his view, regional states do not wish to choose between the US and China but seek a stable equilibrium in which both powers are constructively engaged. Lee's diplomatic messaging—delivered through speeches, interviews, and multilateral forums—reflects this balancing act, where he encouraged Washington to maintain its commitment to Asia without provoking direct confrontation with Beijing (Storey, 2020).

This nuanced perspective aligns with Singapore's broader foreign policy ethos: the belief that small states must hedge against uncertainty by supporting a multilateral order anchored in great power responsibility, rules-based trade, and inclusive regionalism. Lee's emphasis on a credible, consistent US presence underscores not only strategic necessity but also the imperative of normative leadership in a fragmented global order.

4.4. Rules-Based International Order

A recurring and foundational pillar of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's international worldview is his staunch advocacy for a rules-based international order (RBIO). For a small, highly globalized state like Singapore, adherence to international law is not merely a normative preference but a strategic necessity. Lee has repeatedly emphasized that only through a predictable and rules-governed system of international relations can smaller states be assured of their sovereignty, security, and space to maneuver.

Lee articulates this perspective in various high-level forums, asserting that the global order must not be dictated by might but by principles enshrined in international law. For example, in his 2017 speech at the United Nations General Assembly, he stated, “Small states like Singapore rely on international laws and norms to protect our sovereignty and security. We have a vital interest in a world where countries conduct themselves according to agreed rules” (Lee, 2017).

He has strongly supported the role of international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These institutions, in his view, embody the collective commitment of the international community to uphold norms that transcend unilateral power politics. In the context of the South China Sea disputes, Singapore—under Lee's leadership—has urged all parties, including China and the United States, to respect international law and abide by UNCLOS provisions to avoid escalation and to settle disputes peacefully (Koh, 2016).

Importantly, Lee does not view the RBIO as static or Western-imposed, but as a dynamic and inclusive framework that must adapt to new geopolitical realities while preserving its core principles. His advocacy thus reflects a strategic blend of realism and normative idealism: realism in recognizing the limits of power-based diplomacy, and idealism in promoting a cooperative international environment that preserves the interests of small states.

4.5. ASEAN and Regional Multilateralism

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's foreign policy vision has also been marked by a strong commitment to ASEAN centrality and regional multilateralism. He regards ASEAN not just as a diplomatic platform but as a foundational regional institution through which Southeast Asian states can collectively manage external pressures and internal diversity.

Lee has repeatedly emphasized the importance of ASEAN acting cohesively in the face of intensifying great power rivalry. In his 2018 keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, he noted that "ASEAN must stay united and neutral, to engage all major powers constructively, and not be forced to choose sides" (Lee, 2018). For Lee, ASEAN centrality is not about dominance but about convening power—the ability to bring together diverse actors in pursuit of regional peace and stability.

Under his leadership, Singapore has actively advanced regional integration initiatives, most notably the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which aims to create a single market and production base among member states. Lee has also championed trade liberalization through multilateral frameworks such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), both of which enhance ASEAN's economic connectivity with the broader Asia-Pacific region (Ravenhill, 2020).

Moreover, Lee has called for ASEAN to modernize its agenda to address emerging challenges. This includes digital governance, cybersecurity, and maritime security—areas where regional cooperation is both necessary and strategically significant. For instance, during Singapore's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2018, Lee promoted the ASEAN Smart Cities Network as a forward-looking initiative to align digital transformation with regional development goals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2018).

Lee's multilateral approach reflects his belief that ASEAN must function not only as a consensus-based organization but also as a proactive regional actor capable of shaping the strategic environment. This view resonates with Singapore's broader foreign policy ethos: leveraging collective frameworks to expand strategic options and mitigate asymmetries in power.

5. Conclusion

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's international thinking exemplifies a distinctive blend of strategic realism and principled pragmatism, crafted to navigate the challenges of small-state diplomacy in an increasingly uncertain world. Grounded in a clear-eyed understanding of power dynamics, yet receptive to the opportunities offered by multilateral cooperation, Lee's worldview has provided steady guidance for Singapore through two decades of global transformation.

His consistent emphasis on economic openness, regional cooperation through ASEAN, a credible and sustained US presence in Asia, and unwavering respect for international law has not only secured Singapore's interests but also elevated its standing as a trusted and principled actor on the global stage. Lee's foreign policy approach demonstrates that small states, by aligning strategic foresight with normative clarity, can exercise meaningful agency even amid great power rivalry.

As Singapore enters a new phase of leadership, Lee's international vision offers lasting lessons—not just for his successors, but for other small and middle powers striving to maintain sovereignty, relevance, and stability in a complex and competitive international environment. His legacy affirms that influence in world affairs is not solely a function of size or military power, but also of strategic consistency, credibility, and the ability to engage the world with both caution and conviction.

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