

CHAPTER 3

Singapore Engages China's Belt and Road Initiative: The Pitfalls and Promises of Soft Strategies

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Abstract

As a trading state that practices 'abridged Realism' (Chong 2006), Singapore engages China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through soft strategies. On the politico-security front, Singapore has maintained a measured continuity in criticizing China's disregard of international law in relation to territorial disputes in Asia and lobbies ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) to maintain a united front in dealing with a rising China that is frequently tempted to split ASEAN through the artichoke strategy of cutting special bilateral deals. This steadfast adherence to principle has threatened to occasionally derail Sino-Singapore ties. On the other hand, China's BRI is a multilevel chessboard. Singapore's markets and investment climate are attractive to China's BRI-related outbound investments due to the positive reputation of the island's rules, laws, arbitration, syndication of loans and syndication for projects. Singaporean firms lend their Chinese partners social legitimacy and political capital in investing across Asia. This paper examines the uncertain outcomes of these 'soft strategies' played by a small state like Singapore.

On paper, the contrasts in international relations could not have been starker between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Singapore. To begin with, the entire sovereign territory of Singapore is one-ninth the size of the city of Shanghai and its suburbs, while Beijing, China's capital is approximately 23 times the size of Singapore.¹ China's sovereign territorial expanse ensures that it shares long contiguous land borders with Bhutan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Nepal and Pakistan in the west, and Russia and Mongolia in the north, and North Korea to the northeast. The land borders continue to the south with Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. China's maritime borders ensure that its neighbours stretch from north

¹ Calculated on an approximate basis from statistics shown jointly on Google's search engine and Wikipedia.com. This is a sample of the search used: https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1GCEU_enSG826SG826&ei=nYZiXLWRA sXkvgTbLYDYBw&q=size+of+beijing++in+square+kilometres&eq=size+of+beijing++in+square+kilometres &gs_l=psy-ab.3...114395.115601..117432...0.0..0.85.517.7.....0....1..gws-wiz.....0i71j33i10.walLscW28NA, accessed 12 February 2019.

to south in an eastern arc: from Japan and South Korea to Taiwan and across the South China Sea to the slightly more distant Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Singapore by contrast, shares only an artificial land border with Malaysia, and an exclusively maritime border with Indonesia. Singapore is hemmed in by maritime geography and devoid of significant natural resources, while China is evidently located at the heart of the Asian continent with borders joining virtually all the recognizable subregions of ‘Asia’.

This simple comparison is inevitable if one is to understand the relationship between diminutive Singapore and China’s aspirations of revitalizing the ancient Silk Roads as its modern vision of ‘One Belt, One Road’, and now, in its updated terminological redesignation, the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI). Historically, the ancient Silk Roads came about as much by political design as by serendipity of coincidental mercantile and cultural choices. (Elisseeff 2000, Frankopan 2015) President Xi Jinping announced the ‘One Belt, One Road’ vision in 2013 in what was widely seen as a thrust for claiming global leadership in an ideologically benign, constructive manner. By May 2017, when Xi hosted the first ever BRI summit of heads of government involved as partners in the grand vision, the Initiative was perceived as the defining moment of China’s displacement of American leadership under President Donald Trump. As the USA was retrenching its foreign policy towards a populist, right wing agenda, that emphasized mercenary and zero sum relationships with both America’s friends and neutral states, China under Xi Jinping was clearly expanding China’s attractiveness as a generous, flexible great power interested in development-oriented partnerships. (Xi Jinping 2017) In this sense, the BRI, unlike its historical predecessors, carries with it an agenda of augmenting the influence of an emerging Chinese great power.

Singapore, on the other hand, was one of many stopover destinations for pilgrims and traders from across Asia since ancient times. (Fa-Hsien 1886) It was the British takeover of the island from 1819 onwards that amplified its importance in earnest as the ‘Emporium of the East’. As a thriving colonial port deliberately fostered by the British, Singapore’s infrastructure evolved into a global node of finance, communications, sea and air transportation, and especially trade between the entire East Asia, South Asia and thence on to the Middle East, East Africa and Europe. Seaborne trade remained *primus inter pares* amongst rival modes of commerce for Singapore even into the present. It is no surprise that Singapore would retain

a special technical attraction for BRI planning either from the vantage point of the island state or from Beijing. Additionally, Singapore's demographic make-up comprising a population of 75% ethnic Chinese, with Malays, Indians and others making up the remaining 25%, rendered it a territory of exceptional interest for the Chinese diaspora and Chinese governments in both Beijing and Taipei.

In order for the independent state of Singapore to maintain diplomatic cordiality, social peace, and foster pragmatic economic relationships with its Southeast Asian neighbours after 1965, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government assiduously cultivated a foreign policy position designed to dispel regional fears of a 'Third China'. The latter was popularly understood to refer to the probability that Singapore would act as a 'trojan horse/fifth column' for international expansion by either the post-1949 communist government in Beijing, or the rival non-communist government that claimed the title of Republic of China in Taiwan. Be that as it may, the 'Third China' label suited nationalist politicians in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta whenever they needed a target of distraction from domestic political and economic tumult. To neutralize the nationalist propaganda from its immediate neighbours, the PAP has officially and repeatedly resisted petitions to treat Mandarin Chinese as the lingua franca of the island republic. Singaporean leaders have also openly explained throughout the Cold War that until Malaysia and Indonesia formalized diplomatic relations with Beijing, it would not be the first to do so even though the Beijing-controlled Bank of China had operated continuously in Singapore since 1936 and a significant volume of consumer products had been traded bilaterally despite the communist victory in 1949 in mainland China. (Chan 1988, 294-296) Additionally, the PRC has always gone out of its way to court Singapore as a virtual 'blood relative' in either its policies on emulating successful development models or administrative endeavours. The late Premier Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore was often persuaded to act as the unofficial emissary between both Taipei and Beijing whenever either side found it inconvenient to initiate earnest negotiations regarding political differences across the Taiwan Straits. (Zheng and Lim 2016) It was no surprise that Singapore served as the ideal locale for carefully choreographed Cross-Straits Dialogues in 1993 and 2015 under momentarily propitious circumstances. Within Singapore, ties with China and Taiwan also pose another level of political conundrum. Cultural sentiments amongst ethnic Chinese Singaporeans towards both sides of the Taiwan Straits run deep in the psyche of ethnic identity and celebration of festivals such

as the Lunar New Year and Cheng Ming, as well as through adherence to niche religions such as Buddhism and Daoism, and a cult such as Confucianism.

Intensified economic and cultural rapport since the ‘modernization’ of the Chinese economy under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, following the passing of Chairman Mao Zedong, have also developed a reservoir of positive predisposition towards the Chinese ascent as an economic power. Numerous bilaterally invested industrial park projects since the early 1990s such as Suzhou Industrial Park, Wuxi Industrial Park, the Jilin Food Zone, the Tianjin Eco- City and the Guangzhou Knowledge City have reinforced the bonds between China and Singapore on the economic, technological and educational fronts. (Aggarwal 2015) Moreover, there has been a consistent attempt by officials and academics on the Chinese side to study the Singapore model for domestic governance, economy and technical competence since the 1980s. (Leong 2008, Roy 1994) A China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement has been supplemented with a China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and bolstered by Singapore’s frequent ranking as one of the top two investors in China by financial volume.

This snapshot of Singapore-China relations suggests that there is significant complementarity between Beijing and Singapore on multiple fronts in the era of the BRI. More importantly, it also lifts the curtain on the fact that Singapore and China are not interacting in the mode of great and medium powers. There are no military pacts and intractable militarized confrontations, large volume arms sales, tensions over trade deficits, territorial disputes and highly politicized embargoes on high technology transfers. Ironically, it is the USA that retains some degree of suspicion that Singapore’s political and economic proximity to China might threaten American security inadvertently. (Chanlett-Avery 2013) Instead, Singapore’s relations with China under the BRI are set to remain in the soft realm of flows of people, ideas, finance, infrastructure construction, knowledge transfers and the international relations of ‘informal penetration’. (Scott 1965) The latter term refers to that entire range of benign interactions, or possible subversion, between two sovereign states conducted by non-state actors under their respective governments’ control. Although this concept was developed during the Cold War, it does retain relevance today as military strategists and historians parse through the re- emergence of ‘hybrid warfare’ and hybrid foreign policy strategies pursued by states as diverse as China, Iran, Russia and India utilizing diasporic entities, aid

volunteers, scientific scholars, students, labourers and cyberhackers. (Murray and Mansoor 2012)

In this regard, Singapore's engagement with the BRI ought to be scrutinized in terms of the promises and pitfalls of 'soft strategies', not excluding the soft power of demonstrating its expertise in successfully seeding industrial infrastructure, sharing developmental knowhow, and other people-to-people interactions. Three thematic discussions can be teased out from the preceding introduction: *the people-to-people dimension* focusing primarily on educational rapport, political agitation and what might be termed psychological influence operations; the issues arising from Singapore's governmental and private sector *participation in infrastructure and other economic projects resonating to the theme of 'soft economics'*; and *finally, Singapore's existential policy preference for exercising some critical independence from Beijing's diplomatic stances* in relation to Asia and the BRI. In this regard, this is an unusual study that builds on pre-existing research on Sino-Singapore ties that are overly fixated on their authoritarian ideological affinity (Roy 1994, Ortmann and Thompson 2014, Chou, Pan and Poole 2017) or the trending ambivalence between increasing economic collaboration with selective political distancing. (L. T. Lee 2001, Wong and Lye 2016, Tong 2016) These bodies of existing research are not entirely wrong. They are limited by their overly specific foci. The more nuanced studies, which this paper subscribes to, acknowledge a calibrated pragmatism ordering the Singapore-China bilateral relationship from the perspective of their respective policymakers. (Khong 1999, Tan 2012) But as I would shortly suggest, the calibration is not always adjusted perfectly to the spirit of the pragmatic middle position of both countries being good friends while not becoming close allies. Too many uncontrollable moving parts cloud the BRI's smooth implementation as a binder of Sino-Singapore amity. Indeed, some of these retarding factors predate the advent of the BRI under President Xi of China.

The People-to-People Dimension

The people-to-people dimension was built through diasporic connections under colonial conditions. There are three facets to this connection that amount to a continuing social dimension to the Singapore-BRI relationship: the emergence of the anti-colonial diaspora; the agitation of the conflated pro-China and pro-communist student movements during the Cold War; and the ongoing ties between

the Chinese and Singaporean educational institutions, including the prominence of the Confucius Institute.

The anti-colonial diaspora did not emerge from a vacuum. The earliest Chinese migration to Singapore and the Malay Peninsula predated the arrival of British authority in 1819. Many had fled either famine, economic ruin or political hardship under the Manchu (Qing) Dynasty. As the latter endured into the 1890s as the government of China, the collective humiliation of the two Opium Wars waged by European powers against Beijing, compounded by the Sino-French War over the consolidation of French authority in Vietnam, the Sino- Japanese war over Korea, and the poor results of the Boxer Rebellion against western legations in Beijing in 1899-1901, precipitated several covert nationalist movements, including the Tung Meng Hui associated with the leadership of Sun Yat-sen, to plot the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty as the means of rebuilding a modern China. These movements conveniently established ‘overseas missions’ across several Asian territories where Chinese migrants had established roots. Then British-administered Singapore and Malaya hosted these politically motivated movements comprising mostly youths and working age farm labourers, factory hands, teachers, intelligentsia and business people. It was within this milieu that the most prominent leader of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), covering Singapore as well, emerged. Chin Peng’s biography offers a snapshot of this worldview of the so-called Chinese educated population around the time of the transition between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although his story starts in earnest in the years preceding the Great Depression, it is a familiar one that links the sentimental longing for the virtues and strengths of ancestral China, complete with the tales of the rise and fall of kingdoms, with the deeply personal following of the manoeuvres between Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong in the 1920s and 1930s. (Chin Peng 2007, 31-36)

But this is also a story about a motherland that did not leave its diaspora in political limbo as it ‘renovated itself’ from the communist-influenced grassroots. Chin Peng’s road to joining the CPM was a typical one for many Chinese youths in the 1930s. Incensed by the all- out Japanese attack on the nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek in 1937, amidst ongoing rivalries between Chiang and Mao, overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaya reacted with outrage and offered to volunteer in the fight against Japanese aggression. In Singapore, the China-born

businessman Tan Kah Kee established the China Relief Fund to support Chiang and Mao's expedient 'United Front' against Japan. Fearful of anti-Japanese agitation being turned against them, the British approved the China Relief Fund with the proviso that it ought not to be channelled towards military training and provocative anti-Japanese declarations. Not to be outdone, the nascent CPM (then known as the Malayan Communist Party) organized the 'Anti-Enemy Backing-up Society' in tandem to foster Chinese patriotism and provide supplementary aid for the effort to roll back Japan's encroachments in China. Although the Backing-up Society was never officially recognized by the British, it publicly aligned itself with the purposes of the China Relief Fund and recruited impressionable youngsters like Chin Peng to pledge themselves to a student regime of strict discipline in learning and behaviour. (Chin Peng 2007, 43-45) Additionally, in a pattern similar to communist recruitment after 1945, the Backing-up Society socialized Chinese students into a patriotic war frenzy against Japan by holding regular study and information sessions that disseminated news and encouraged discussions about the latest developments in the Pacific War in China and elsewhere. Chin Peng also recalled that as the war dragged on, Chiang Kai-shek obtained British permission to conduct open recruitment for military manpower in Malaya to join the fight on the frontlines in China. (Chin Peng 2007, 44)

It was within this charged atmosphere, that Chin Peng was noticed by a schoolmate and his 'friend' from the Backing-up Society as someone who ought to be encouraged to intensify his activities for aiding the motherland. In any case, Chinese Schools in Singapore and Malaya styled their curriculum and calendar after the system in the motherland with textbooks imported from China as well. The British censored certain phrases as they saw fit to avoid local unrest becoming directed against them but they left patriotic expressions to expel the Japanese and renovate China unexpurgated. With disillusionment setting in against Chiang Kai-shek's increasing military reliance upon western military intervention against Japan, the communist agenda quietly gained ground with the patriotic Chinese in Singapore and Malaya in 1938. It helped the Marxist cause that the knock-on effects of the Great Depression in Europe and North America continued to drain the wages of workers in Malaya and Singapore while the British protected their 'white colonial' privileges. (Chin Peng 2007, 48-49) This was when Chin Peng recalled that one of his teachers took him aside and lent him books on Marxist philosophy authored by Chinese and Russian authors, but translated completely into Chinese.

(Chin Peng 2007, 49-50) By 1940, Chin Peng became a probationary member of the CPM in his home town in Malaya, Sitiawan. The rest of his story became predictable as he transitioned quickly from ardent Chinese patriot to fierce anti-Japanese guerrilla under the wartime organization known as the Malayan Peoples’ Anti-Japanese Army after Japan successfully invaded Malaya and Singapore in 1941. After the Pacific War ended in Japan’s defeat, Chin Peng’s loyalties were defined firmly by his alignment with the Chinese Communist cause of worldwide revolution against the ‘corrupt’ capitalist-imperialist world order.

Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of the People’s Action Party (PAP) and consequently, the first prime minister of independent Singapore, recalled that as a mostly English-educated Peranakan Chinese² he could not initially comprehend the fervour of the Chinese educated who comprised the bulk of the ‘Chinese population’ in Malaya and Singapore. Lee’s introduction to the alignment of communism and pro-China ‘chauvinism’ came in the form of Chinese school student agitation against British colonial policies in the 1950s. (K. Y. Lee 1998, 166- 176) Following the British imposed ordinance for youths of eligible ages to register for compulsory military ‘national service’, presumably to protect colonial rule and combat the growing communist insurgency underway in Malaya, some 500 Chinese middle school students participated in a riot on 13 May 1954 protesting the new law. In the aftermath of the riot, several of the Chinese students approached Lee for legal help. Lee had returned with a law degree from Cambridge University only a few years earlier and was keen to organize local nationalists to oust the British. Naturally he was sympathetic to Chinese agitation in tandem with his political goals. In a mirror of Chin Peng’s recollections, Lee’s memoirs record that he was both respectful and impressed by the fact that the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya fended for themselves in spite of a mostly apathetic and discriminatory British colonial power:

The Chinese collected donations and built their own schools. Completely self-supporting, they used textbooks published in China and employed teachers

² This term refers to the hybrid cultural identity produced by mixed marriages between first generation Chinese settlers who intermarried with Malays and some Europeans in Malaya and Singapore. Being born in the colonies without a direct blood relationship with mainland China, their orientations were slightly more western oriented even though many Chinese values and customs were retained through their identity as ‘Straits Chinese’ or ‘Peranakan Chinese’.

recruited in China who taught in Mandarin just as if they were in Guangdong or Fujian province. Culturally, they lived in a world apart. Graduates could either continue their studies by switching over to an English school and so make their way up the English-educated ladder, or look for jobs in firms that used the English language – Chinese shops, restaurants and business houses, and the few Chinese-owned banks.

They felt dispossessed, and their lack of economic opportunity turned their schools into breeding grounds for the communists, who had been burrowing away in Malaya and Singapore since 1923, when the Comintern (Communist International) first sent agents from Shanghai to the island. After the war, the record of its resistance to the Japanese gave the Malayan Communist Party (i.e. subsequently the CPM) a prestige that made it a powerful force among the impressionable young, and it proceeded to build up a network of cells in the classrooms. Many teachers became communist cadres or sympathisers; many overaged students whose education had been interrupted by the Japanese occupation were indoctrinated and co-opted... (K. Y. Lee 1998, 167)

Lee noted that his legal consultations with the Chinese students revealed an unprecedented degree of political shrewdness and tactics that operated at a highly orchestrated level. If the British took action against a handful of them, the 'students' would rally their comrades across all Chinese schools and Chinese-dominated factories and stage conjoined boycotts, sit-ins and invite press coverage through mass agitation. (K. Y. Lee 1998, 169) Through sheer unity in numbers, organized students would manipulate public opinion and hopefully intimidate the government of the day into conceding to them. The communist organized student activism during the 1950s and 1960s at the Chinese Middle Schools and at the erstwhile Nanyang University is well documented and corroborates the peer recollections of Chin Peng and Lee Kuan Yew about the tenacity of mainland China's influence on Chinese-oriented student culture as a malleable target for ideological steering. (T. H. Lee 1976, Clutterbuck 1985, 84- 98, Singh 2015, 66-84)

Following the PAP government's post-independence campaigns to depoliticize the universities, including the mostly Chinese medium, locally Chinese funded but China-oriented, Nanyang University, the influence of mainland China in Singapore's educational system was reduced to a minimum. Since 1965, the

adoption by the PAP dominated parliament of a standardized national language policy providing for English as a First Language with a ‘mother tongue’ to be taught as a second language has further eroded the influence of a predominantly China-oriented educational stream. Additionally, the left wing oriented Chinese newspapers such as the Nanyang Siang Pau witnessed four of its editors hauled up under the Internal Security Act in 1971 for intentionally ‘glamourizing the communist system’ and inciting chauvinistic attitudes towards Chinese culture and education to the detriment of good relations between the government and people of Singapore. (National Library Board n.d.) The Nanyang University was eventually merged with the English medium University of Singapore to constitute the National University of Singapore in 1980 to consolidate a more multiracial and multireligious, integrated university curriculum, while the Nanyang Technological Institute was created as a wholly new polytechnic level entity on the site of the original Nanyang University in 1981. By 1991, the present Nanyang Technological University was created out of the Nanyang Technological Institute as a full-fledged science and technology varsity, marginalizing once and for all its connection with a China-oriented scholarly mandate.

At the same time, Chinese educated Singaporeans cannot claim to be discriminated at all. There are dedicated Chinese medium television channels, several popular music format Chinese radio channels, along with a host of short wave Chinese dialect broadcasts to cater to the older generation unaccustomed to speaking and listening in Mandarin Chinese. With the Deng Xiaoping oriented reforms in China heralding the arrival of a more constructive Chinese economic power internationally, the PAP government has sustained a ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign in several rounds since the late 1970s and into the present. Learning Mandarin Chinese amongst adults and schoolchildren is expected to lend Singaporeans an edge in doing business with and working in China. The economic indices of Sino-Singapore trade and investment volume show that this has paid off quite handsomely. (Tong 2016)

However, there remain lingering fears that an assertive China, especially under President Xi’s leadership, may inadvertently incite a revival of Chinese chauvinism to the detriment of multiracial harmony within Singapore. Xi is known to have actively called on Chinese citizens everywhere to actively burnish China’s national image abroad to counter the perceived bad press systematically put out by western

governments and news agencies. (Buckley 2013) Singapore's national holiday celebrating the Chinese Lunar New Year has consistently sought to carefully balance the festival's association with a traditional Confucian oriented Chineseness with the practice of Chinese persons inviting non-Chinese citizens to their homes for celebrations and feasting, along with a multicultural street parade blending traditional lion and dragon dances with samba dancers from South America, folk dancers from the Philippines, and circus performers from Russia.

This balancing has continued with the Nanyang Technological University partnering with China's Office of Chinese Language Council International [a British Council equivalent] to operate what is probably the largest Confucius Institute in Singapore and Southeast Asia known as the CI-NTU. This branch of the Confucius Institute not only offers Mandarin language courses to adults and children, it most recently declared that it would offer in collaboration with the Singaporean Ministry of Education, a Mandarin oriented programme for pre-school children. At its launch in January 2018, the Singaporean Director of the CI-NTU noted that a new form of bilateral people-to-people socialization was being carefully pioneered for future generations of Singaporeans with an ostensible nod to the past history of educational subversion:

We set out to develop a localised Chinese curriculum for pre-schoolers as materials used by some pre-schools are sourced from other countries, or may not be of high quality. Our newly developed curriculum would also be helpful to pre-school operators that may not have the resources to design their own curriculum. (Teng 2018)

Soft Economics: Singaporean participation in infrastructure and other BRI economic projects

Six years into the BRI, Singaporean business press coverage of the BRI have coined two interesting keywords to simultaneously describe what China has not accomplished and what more needs to be done: 'rigour and reassurance'. (Heng 2019) This assessment by Singapore's mostly government-linked broadsheet newspapers captures the fallout from the BRI's taint with 'debt trap diplomacy' arising from a string of controversial deals. Firstly, there was China's *quid pro quo* of accepting a 99-year concession over the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka

after the latter’s government claimed it could not repay Chinese loans involved in the project. Likewise, in Pakistan, Beijing’s military and financial alleviation package in response to Pakistan’s claim of unsustainable debt incurred from accepting Chinese infrastructure projects spurred worldwide accusations of Chinese colonialism abroad. (Abi-Habib 2018) Then there were stories of shoddy workmanship in Africa and Beijing’s alleged renegeing on promises to hire local labourers to build roads and buildings in favour of shipping in ‘more reliable’ Chinese labourers. (De Morais 2011) More recently, in 2018, Malaysia’s newly elected Pakatan Harapan coalition government unilaterally decided that the outgoing Barisan Nasional government’s infrastructure deals with Beijing were mired in the personal corruption of former Premier Najib Tun Razak and his allies. The new prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, lost no time in flying into Beijing to seek an indefinite postponement of existing China-funded projects citing mounting budget deficits in Kuala Lumpur.

Interestingly in June 2017, a joint business confidence survey commissioned by the Singapore Business Federation from the Economist Intelligence Unit indicated some cause for concern in the area of business confidence. 77 respondents holding senior positions from multinational companies completed this survey online, among which 68.5% of these firms claimed to regularly garner annual revenues of more than US\$1 billion. (Staples and Qiu 2017,6) In responding to questions that asked them to define BRI linked investments, the report noted that:

Just over half of our respondents (52%) define a BRI project as ‘any infrastructure- related project with mainland Chinese involvement’ while 14% adopt a more stringent definition whereby ‘only projects in some way funded by the AIIB or SRF [Silk Road Fund]’ qualify. A quarter of respondents admit to being ‘not sure’ while a further 9% put forward their own definition. (Staples and Qiu 2017, 7)

The report concluded that this reaction demonstrated firms’ lack of clarity regarding the ownership of BRI projects. How deep and how necessary would be the stakes invested by the Chinese government in each project? Such was the concern that subsequent responses to the questionnaire revealed. Additionally, it appeared that there was equal confusion over whether the reference to the ‘Belt’ meant strictly land projects, while ‘Road’ supposedly translated to mean ‘maritime roads’.

Many respondents were wondering if the BRI translated into China's attempt to parochially lock down countries and governments into specific communications trunk routes to service Chinese economic ambitions. Notwithstanding these uncertainties, there were several silver linings to the survey along with even more caveats that deserve highlighting in the following long quote:

Over 80% of respondents agree or strongly agree that the BRI represents an opportunity. Yet in contrast to this strong endorsement a more nuanced response emerges when respondents are asked if the BRI presents a risk, with 34% agreeing to some degree, 38% disagreeing and a further 28% neither agreeing nor disagreeing...

Interestingly, while the geographic breakdown of our survey respondents was fairly evenly split between Asia (33%), Europe (32%) and North America (32%), Asia-based firms were more likely to agree that BRI represents a risk (53%) than those from elsewhere (26%). Why is it that while both sets of respondents agree on the opportunities, Asian firms appear more bearish? It may be that distant head offices in Europe or North America have a less granular understanding about the challenges on the ground, or that some Asian respondents fear being excluded from the party. This explanation might resonate with firms from Japan, for instance. (Staples and Qiu 2017, 10)

This self-explanatory framing of the political economy of the BRI as either an opportunity or a risk, in tandem with the nuanced responses it provokes, provides a litmus test that opens up avenues for Singapore's participation in aiding the grand project as well as filling a niche role within it. The latter might be construed in terms of what Susan Strange, Claire Cutler, Virginia Haufler and others have variously termed as contributions to the knowledge structure of the global economy or the lending of private authority to build constructive knowledge authorities for steering global economic decisions. (Strange 2015, Cutler, Haufler and Porter 1999)

It is well known that Singapore's foreign policy, including its foreign economic policy, projects soft power in spite of its physical size. This is the thesis advanced by Alan Chong which he labels 'virtual enlargement'. Singapore performs an outsized but valuable role for the global economy by supplying informal ideas,

providing formal bureaucratic leadership, and showcasing its own domestic economic management as a model for developing countries to adapt to. (A. Chong, *Small State Soft Power Strategies* 2010) As mentioned earlier, Singapore had quietly but steadfastly maintained modest trading and banking links with Maoist China in spite of the PAP government’s position on communist subversion within the country. This signalled to Beijing that the island republic was willing to be pragmatic and yet retain some notion of cultural fraternity with the ‘Chinese motherland’. Hence, once Deng Xiaoping succeeded Mao at the helm of the PRC, China’s supreme leader turned to Singapore as a kindred economy to assist in China’s economic reforms. Despite the lag in establishing official diplomatic relations at full Ambassadorial level, both sides proceeded to exchange high level economic delegations, committed themselves to treating each other’s trade under ‘most favoured nation’ status and set up Commercial Representatives’ Offices in each country. By 1985, the economic relationship was cemented by China’s invitation to Dr Goh Keng Swee, Singapore’s former Deputy Prime Minister, Finance Minister and initiator of Singapore’s renowned Jurong Industrial Estate, to serve as special economic adviser on the development of China’s coastal economic zones. These initiatives represented the first wave of Singapore’s contribution to the knowledge structure of China’s economic ascent. (Tong 2016, 53-54) Much remains unknown of the full extent of how Singapore’s transfer of ideas, planning expertise and administrative experience shaped Beijing’s thinking, for such is the strategy of calculated modesty in Singapore’s soft strategies towards China’s economic development.

Leaving aside the consistently double digit annual growth in Singapore’s exports to, and imports from the PRC, (Tong 2016) the government of Singapore is actively encouraging the private sector in the island to spearhead the country’s contribution to the BRI. *One visible but seemingly intangible thrust lies in the field of bearing financial risk and arranging financing for BRI projects.* This is where Singapore’s banks, government-linked companies and private logistics companies leverage upon their experience in building industrial parks in China and elsewhere in Asia. This is augmented by Singapore’s formidable reputation as an efficient and highly transparent banking mecca. Moreover, Singapore has been described as having offered China holistic design aid for starting up projects such as the Suzhou Industrial Park and the Tianjin Eco-City project.

The idea of reliable, rule-based, transparent and diligent 'Brand Singapore Inc.' is meant to encourage third party private and sovereign investment funds and corporations to share the 'buy in' for BRI projects. Although there is no sign that the Singapore government is deliberately coordinating the policies of banks based in the island republic, private banks such as Standard Chartered (StanChart) have taken the initiative to privilege lending and introductions to financial collaborations related to the BRI. In September 2017, StanChart's CEO Simon Cooper openly declared that its global banking and institutional banking operations were expecting a boost from the BRI. It wanted to market itself as the leading bank in Singapore to assist corporate clients interested in entering into BRI projects. Cooper said in an interview that 'rather than having a bond team competing with a syndicated loan team, we bring them together and say: "How can we maximise the resources of the firm globally?"'. (J. Lee 2017) Cooper went on to claim that StanChart's 'global footprint' overlapped with 67% of the BRI countries. Its largest market remained Hong Kong but Cooper chose to draw attention to the far-flung African sections of the BRI. In Zambia, StanChart arranged US\$500 million to the government there for the improvement of water supplies and medical facilities. Separately, the bank also supplied US\$575 million for power generation projects in the same country. (J. Lee 2017) Cooper went as far as to suggest that Singapore served as the financial resource pool cum magnet for companies engaged anywhere in the BRI. In Cooper's words, 'many of those businesses have regional treasury centres sitting in Singapore. So again, one of the things that Standard Chartered can do is to use that global network, to hopefully promote and drive the businesses through Singapore.' (J. Lee 2017) One year later, StanChart boasted that it had achieved coverage of 70% of the BRI countries. More interestingly, it revealed that financing for two thirds of BRI projects within ASEAN were assembled by project finance teams based in Singapore. Additionally, StanChart boasted that it was a key player in the first 'infrastructure project finance securitisation in Asia' when it assisted with structuring of a US\$336.6 million deal for Temasek Holdings-backed Clifford Capital 'which gave institutional investors access to infrastructure debt in Asia-Pacific and the Middle East.' (Siow 2018) Theoretically, institutional investors should desire to buy into infrastructure debt backed by reputable global banks as the latter would be likely to guarantee good returns given the scale and volume of the financial outlays for infrastructure and the length of time needed for repayment of loans with interest accrued. It is therefore no surprise that Singapore's Minister

for Trade and Industry could claim in May 2018 that one third of all Chinese outward investments flow through Singapore. (Shiao 2018)

Additionally, on a government-to-government level, Singapore has invested itself politically and commercially in another landmark industrial park equivalent project called the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (CCI). With evident approval of image-conscious Chinese officialdom in Chongqing city itself, Ravi Menon, the managing director of Singapore’s central bank equivalent, the Monetary Authority of Singapore, described the extent of Singapore’s lending of its financial credibility to catalyse Chongqing’s growth within the BRI in this manner:

The financial cooperation pillar of the CCI has helped Chongqing corporates to raise offshore financing from Singapore’s financial centre. As of end-2016, 39 cross-border financing deals amounting to 22 billion yuan were completed. The average financing cost for these deals in 2016 was about 4.86% - a good 70 basis points lower than the average interest rate for one- to three-year yuan loans in Chongqing. The savings in financing costs amounted to 152 million yuan. (Menon 2017)

The Monetary Authority of Singapore further envisages expanding the role of capital markets in financing growth as well as enhancing risk management solutions to support investment in both Singapore and Chongqing vis-à-vis the BRI. In another direction of lending Singapore’s considerable financial soft power to underwrite assurance of trade flows through the Eurasian Landbridge, CrimsonLogic, a Singapore company specialising in delivering e-Government services and logistics signed a memorandum of understanding with Kazakhstan’s Astana International Financial Centre to develop blockchain technologies to facilitate trade through the country. In the press statement released by CrimsonLogic in November 2018, the scale of the Singaporean corporate ambition is made clear through technical language:

The partnership includes [transforming] AIFC as a CrimsonLogic Open Trade Blockchain (OTB) node for Kazakhstan and Eurasia; integration of the AIFC OTB node onto CALISTA™ (a global trade and logistics platform); and connecting Kazakhstan’s Khorgos Dry Port to China’s Southern Transport Corridor (STC) via CALISTA™. The event was graced by Prime Minister of

the Republic of Kazakhstan, H.E. Mr. Bakytzhan Sagintayev, and Singapore's Emeritus Senior Minister, Goh Chok Tong, who gave the forum's opening address.

OTB is an inclusive and extensible blockchain service built for the trade communities to boost overall efficiency, security and transparency for global trade. It is also the region's first cross-border blockchain platform that is aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The signed MoU will see AIFC become a trusted trade node on the OTB platform, and a Services Partner for Kazakhstan and Eurasia comprising of Central Asia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. (CrimsonLogic 2018)

What this provision of a blockchain platform for trade means for Singapore's role is that firms that are headquartered on the island are virtually enlarging its economic interface with infinite and extra-regional points with the BRI network. The logic of Singapore's financial soft power lies in the understanding that if the agents and elements of this soft power can successfully expedite China's potential for integrating intimately into multiple target countries, Singapore's reputation and business opportunities grow along with Chinese and other BRI-related firms' frictionless business activities. This form of financial soft power may be dubbed the 'hitch hiking strategy' of latching onto the network potential of the BRI. Singapore-Kazakhstan economic ties are likely to witness unprecedented growth momentum due to the BRI. At the same time, it should be noted that such a strategy can stumble in the long term. Singapore's financial reputational strengths are 'soft' managerial skills that could be imitated by China and other BRI countries who might find it expedient to eliminate Singaporean 'middlemanship' over time. Moreover, unlike Singapore, most of the BRI states do not regularly enjoy high rankings on Transparency indices and anti-corruption tables. This can mean that Singaporean financial soft power can metaphorically land on hard, inhospitable, rocky political ground.

A second visible economic strategy of Singapore is to enhance connectivity within the BRI. In theory, the word connectivity does not carry any specific meaning except to encompass physical transportation, electronic communications and even social and business familiarity between peoples. In the world of business, connectivity can mean multiplying the store of business intelligence, easing the 'red tape' that

impedes electronic commerce, or even more conventionally, building new roads and railways that directly eliminate the need to circumnavigate physical geography, or simply constructing airports that alleviate the geographical inaccessibility of certain population and resource centres. Singapore is literally magnifying its wealth of experience serving as Southeast Asia’s premier transportation, logistics, air travel and e-commerce hub. It champions the so-called Southern Transport Corridor connecting a literal belt of economically vibrant inland Chinese cities such as Lanzhou, Chengdu, Chongqing and Kunming by rail to a relatively underutilized container port at Qinzhou on the Beibu Gulf, also better known as the Gulf of Tonkin. It is no surprise that the Singaporean government linked port operator PSA International is in a joint venture with China’s Beibu Gulf Port Group and Singapore-owned Pacific International Lines to operate four out of six berths at Qinzhou.

In his visit to the port and various cities connected to it by rail, Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean drew press attention to the underappreciated possibilities of connecting China’s hitherto neglected inland cities to the coast and inland dry ports through efficient railway networks. (K. P. Chong 2018a) Interestingly, Minister Teo made an unobtrusive reference to the fact that the maritime connectivity of the Southern Transport Corridor underscores and enlarges Singapore’s maritime port status in the era of the BRI, much as it was the case during the ancient maritime Silk Road. (K. P. Chong 2018b) Conveniently, this dovetails with mainstream impressions in Guangxi province and elsewhere in China that western China, being inland, has historically experienced under-industrialization due to these provinces’ limited access to the sea being channelled almost exclusively through the crowded Yangtze River and thence further north through Shanghai. Opening up the inland cities through direct railways linked to newer ports benefits Guangxi’s aspirations to develop its economy with the most direct and cost-efficient routes to Singapore, the Malacca Straits and then into the Indian Ocean and Europe. (South China Morning Post 2018) In this sense, the agents of Singaporean connectivity, Pacific International Lines and PSA International, are simultaneously opening up opportunities for China’s domestic industrial development.

Overall, Singapore’s active contributions to Chinese connectivity on sea and land (through financing and technological facilitation of trade logistics tracking)

anchors it as much as possible as a catalyst of the BRI's economic dynamism while downplaying the possibility that China's other railway and maritime projects may one day bypass Singapore's ports and upend its status as Southeast Asia's premier transport hub. The latter dire scenario is widely dubbed as the 'Malacca Straits Dilemma' implying that China, rather than Singapore, may enjoy over time the viable option of avoiding the congested and strategically vulnerable shipping transit through the Straits of Malacca by transporting its imports and exports via the overland roads and railways through the Eurasian Landbridge via Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, Belorussia, Poland and Hungary and so forth. Other more creative forms of commercially exploiting connectivity is the joint venture between CapitaLand, Surbana Jurong, and Zhejiang Communication Investment Real Estate Group to build high quality residential centres along the high speed rail lines that run through Jiaying in Zhejiang province, near Hong Kong and Macau. This was one of 14 Memoranda of Understanding signed with the Zhejiang provincial government in 2017. (Anonymous contributor 2018) Residential housing sited within easy proximity to efficient transportation lines represents a whole different dimension of connectivity, a human geography that is familiar to railway economists, but ostensibly less familiar to scholars of international relations. But this also means that unless observers of Singapore-China relations are prepared to adopt multidisciplinary lenses, they are likely to proverbially miss the trees for the woods in their analyses.

Singapore's existential policy preference for exercising some critical independence from Beijing's diplomatic stances

Despite the tangible economic projects along the Belt and Road, Singapore steadfastly maintains an open-ended omnidirectional policy towards the great powers, preferring close partnerships without formal alliances. (A. Chong, Abridged Realism 2006, Kausikan, Singapore is not an Island 2017) The official line from Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is that the republic supports an open and inclusive regional security architecture that admits all relevant and interested great powers within multiple overlapping dialogues and formal summitry. The United States is an exception in this regard. In Singapore's perception, it is an 'offshore' great power that does not share common land or maritime borders with Asia, and which is mostly perceived by Singapore's leaders since Lee Kuan Yew as mostly benign in its military and foreign policy approaches to Asia. China however, is

differently treated along the same criteria. This paper has already drawn attention to Beijing’s extensive diasporic connections to Southeast Asia along with its involvement in multiple territorial disputes with Singapore’s ASEAN neighbours. This could potentially reignite the controversy about Singapore’s Chinese majority population steering the island’s foreign policy as a ‘Third China’ in favour of the PRC’s great power agenda.

Therefore, the diplomatic component of Singapore’s posture towards the PRC has sought to maintain a politically correct distance from Beijing. (Tan 2012) While economic relations have acquired significant momentum in building connectivity and financing for the BRI, Singapore maintains its insistence on the South China Sea and other territorial disputes involving China as being treated within the norms of international law. Thus far, the island republic has also sought to avoid commenting directly on the normative aspects of the claims on the Spratly islands including the right of ownership. Singapore’s stated position on all territorial disputes is the belief in the ‘due process’ of mitigating armed clashes between the claimant states through reference to international conventions and regimes. This has riled China from time to time when Beijing openly prods the island republic to avoid taking sides with its ASEAN neighbours on ‘legalizing’ the South China Sea dispute. In this regard, Singapore strongly justifies its position by citing the fact that ASEAN solidarity has to be considered vis- à-vis China and that no ASEAN claimant state (i.e. Brunei, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam) has unambiguously forsworn the need to respect international law in the Spratlys. In a mirror of its position on economic proximity in assisting China on the BRI, Singapore takes no position on its ASEAN neighbours making deals with China on prospecting and drilling for oil and gas in the South China Sea in spite of ongoing political differences.

The other issue is Taiwan. It is open knowledge that Singapore has had close diplomatic and defence training ties with the island since 1975. The Guomintang government that has ruled the island since 1949 handily acceded to Singapore’s request for training space for the nascent Singapore Armed Forces. Moreover, the presidents of Taiwan from Chiang Ching-kuo onwards have regarded Singapore’s leaders as valuable dialogue partners and confidantes on world affairs. Correspondingly, the presidents of Taiwan have treated the occasions of quasi-official and private visits to Singapore as acts of asserting diplomatic space in

defiance of China's relentless diplomatic embargo on Taipei's foreign relations. Chinese leaders from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao have tolerated Singapore's explanation of its need to maintain an exceptional friendship with Taipei while openly proclaiming adherence to a 'One China' policy recognizing Beijing as the sovereign legitimate government of China while disallowing full embassy status for Taiwan in Singapore. Despite the BRI, and Taiwan's indirect involvement in it through third party supply chains and financing, Beijing maintains official hostility towards Taipei. Aside from a brief 'honeymoon' in Cross Straits relations under President Ma Ying-jeou of the Guomintang party, the re-election of a Democratic Progressive Party president (Tsai Ing-wen) in recent years has triggered renewed hostility from Beijing, including the resort to cyber attacks. Singapore has not ceased its military training arrangements in Taiwan all this while, and simultaneously kept up regular 'private visits' by Singaporean ministers to Taiwan.

Under Xi Jinping's presidency, the return of strident nationalism as a centrepiece of PRC foreign policy, alongside the more Liberal-oriented BRI, has increasingly meant that Beijing has stepped up the regularity of its propaganda attacks on Singapore's special relationship with Taipei. In November 2016, Beijing apparently staged a diplomatic incident to 'teach Singapore a lesson' in relation to its positions on Taiwan and the South China Sea. Nine Terrex armoured personnel carriers belonging to the Singapore Armed Forces were being shipped from Taiwan back to Singapore after an exercise on a commercial container vessel that made stops in Xiamen and Hong Kong en route to Singapore. Chinese authorities inspected the military cargo at Xiamen but decided to alert Hong Kong authorities instead about the improper paperwork accompanying the Terrexes. Once impounded in Hong Kong, the seizure of the vehicles was given maximum media exposure. Beijing admonished Singapore through initially sub-official channels, such as middle ranking military officers and academics in television interviews, accusing Singapore of acting against China's national security by sending military cargo with inadequate paperwork through its territory. China also warned Singapore not to deviate from the One China policy. (Channel News Asia 2017) It was also deliberately unspecified as to whether Beijing was drawing a red line over further Singapore Armed Forces' training in Taiwan. Additional layers of Chinese propaganda attacks even raised the fact that Singapore was misbehaving as a fraternal Chinese nation – a clear reference to the Third China image – and

acting to threaten the principle of ‘One China’. After nearly two months, the Terrexes were released by Hong Kong authorities amidst unspecific suggestions that the matter had arisen mostly from improper documentation of military cargo transiting Hong Kong. The Hong Kong authorities treated the Singapore Armed Forces and the Government of Singapore as being the ‘consignees’ of the cargo and hence not liable to legal charges that the shipping company faced. (Lim 2017)

If this was subtle pressure short of a full blown confrontation between Singapore and Beijing, it has triggered an equally sagely dose of counter-propaganda from Singapore. In employing former Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Permanent Secretary as the mouthpiece, Singapore was maintaining a sense of calibrated rebuke towards Beijing’s domineering stance without jeopardizing the overall relationship. Kausikan had earlier commented in 2014 that geography gives Singapore and ASEAN ‘no choice but to move ASEAN-China relations forward’. (Kausikan, Singapore is not an Island 2017, 99) But leaving the question of an asymmetrical relationship aside, he quoted the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius in arguing that harmony in international relations could only happen if large states adopted magnanimity as a foreign policy, while small states exercised wisdom in dealing with all states. (Kausikan, Singapore is not an Island 2017, 99) Understandably, Kausikan left these normative parameters undefined for deliberately unspecified reasons. Following the earlier-mentioned Terrex incident, and a spate of Chinese attempts to influence Singaporean officials at think-tanks in Singapore, Kausikan launched into another subtle commentary in 2018 admonishing Beijing’s influence operations while also suggesting that both sides return to a sense of moderation in handling diplomatic differences while respecting sovereignty. This chameleonic discourse is typical of Singapore’s strategically slippery handling of Chinese superpower hubris in the era of the BRI. It deserves to be quoted here in a large excerpt to reveal the colourful subtleties of Singapore’s posture of maintaining a safe political distance from Beijing’s encroachments:

The overall objective of the deployment of persuasion, inducement or coercion is to create a psychological environment that accentuates the efficacy of China’s most insistent tactic, and this tactic is simply to pose false choices and to force choices between false choices.

It sounds simple but it can be a very powerful and extremely effective technique

- of forcing false choices on you and making you choose between false choices deployed within the framework of either overarching narratives or specific narratives as to a country or specific to a particular issue.

The purpose of these narratives is to narrow the scope of choices and they are usually presented in binary terms and the intention is to, as it were, stampede your mind so that the critical faculty is not fully engaged, and to instil a sense of fatalistic inevitability about the choices forced upon you.

Let me give you some examples of the overarching grand narratives that are commonly used.

One is, for example, “America is the past, China is the future, so get on the right track”. And the Belt and Road is, among other things, part of this kind of narrative.

Another one is, “America is inconsistent but China is a geographic fact in this region and, therefore, will always be here, so, again, get on the right side of history. Choose wisely”.

Another is, “Being close to America makes it difficult to have a close economic relationship with China”.

Let me give you some examples of specific narratives that were deployed against Singapore in the last couple of years.

First, one specific narrative is on the South China Sea. “Singapore has no claims in the South China Sea, so why is the Singapore Government taking sides against China?”

Another one, “Relations were much better under Lee Kuan Yew because he understood China in a way that the present Singapore leadership does not understand China”.

And a third one is, you know, “Singapore is a small country and it should not take sides against China”.

Now these narratives, whether of the overarching type or the more specific type, are quite powerful because they are not entirely fabrications, they do contain a kernel of truth, they are not made up.

They are only either extremely simplistic as to be gross distortions of much more complex realities or leave out vital factors.

I’ll give you one example - this idea that Singapore had a much better relationship under Lee Kuan Yew because he understood China much better than the present leadership.

Well, it leaves out one vital fact: Lee Kuan Yew is the only non-communist leader that ever went against the Chinese-supported United Front and won, and that drew a red line on which the relationship developed. That is never part of the narrative.

FLAWS OF INFLUENCE OPS

These kind of operations that I’ve described suffer from three critical flaws. First, what I call cultural autism.

Second, a tendency towards self-deception and a tendency sometimes to overreach.

A good example: Chinese operations among overseas Chinese in South-east Asia. Anybody with even a passing acquaintance of the history and politics of this region knows this will bring China into some extremely sensitive territory.

If you travel throughout South-east Asia, you will hear many anecdotes of pushback. Since I retired, I’ve been travelling quite a lot in Central Asia and I find that there is similar pushback (against China’s influence) in almost every country.

You can find that kind of pushback in almost any region of the world.

I’m not saying that it means that China or these relationships are going to fall apart, but it means that there is this undercurrent which makes them somewhat brittle.

And it's not just confined to this area, the Belt and Road project and things like that. You see what's happening in Malaysia. There is some revaluation. I don't think they are going to reject the relationship with China, they will certainly revalue.

With all these trade troubles between the US and China, I think one factor is the Chinese badly underestimated the depth of resentment that has been building up in American businesses over many years and over the theft of technology, intellectual property rights and so on.

And they are a bit shocked. (Kausikan, An expose of how states manipulate other countries' citizens 2017)

This statement is a fine summary of Singaporean soft power couched in terms of political and intellectual independence from great power intimidation through fair and foul means.

Conclusion

The BRI is clearly a multidimensional challenge, as well as an opportunity for Singapore in terms of foreign policy, social engagement, and most definitely economic growth through external momentum. However, the complicating factor is the strategic blowback of dealing with a superpower. The Chinese superpower still adheres to a Marxist-Leninist vision of governance even if it has been reinvented as 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'. There is nothing inherently negative about a reinvented Chinese socialist state pursuing mercantilist development strategies in tandem with foreign partners and linking the underdeveloped world in a new web of economic interdependence that fulfils developmental goals worldwide where the World Bank has fallen short.

As a small Southeast Asian state with a sizable ethnic Chinese majority, Singapore dealing with China on the BRI reopens a number of difficult dilemmas. How much would engagement with the BRI financially and transactionally avoid reviving the policy red lines that attend to a Third China image? Singapore's handling of people-to-people ties will surely have to steer carefully across a complicated history of past alienation between mainland Chinese nationalism

and ideology, and Singapore’s present nationalist trajectory of self-determination as a multiracial polity. Economically, Singapore’s financial and connectivity-oriented soft power has emerged as an unprecedented ‘winner’ in riding the BRI for indefinite economic growth into the next century. The BRI networks Singapore into productive, albeit uncharted, economic territories. In terms of the high politics of foreign policy, Singapore as a small state will inevitably have to endure trials of its open and inclusive approach towards developing omnidirectional proximity to all great powers.

China is quickly proving to be an exceptional great power that is increasingly embracing some locally syncretic version of national socialism that is leaning on friendly countries to declare zero sum friendships in favour of it. This will therefore be a perennial challenge for small state Singapore. Its soft power is overwhelmingly successful in its initial attraction to China, but sustaining it against the *realpolitik* calculations of the other side remains an existential task. Sustaining this soft power of working constructively on the BRI will increasingly mean circulating narratives that sagaciously pronounce on open ended pragmatic morality while encouraging vigilance about exploitation by the stronger entity.

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