
P O  N T E R

JOURNAL OF THE SAF

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in the Grey Zone**

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April 2022



GRAND STRATEGY FOR NON-GREAT POWER STATES IN THE GREY ZONE

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ABSTRACT

States are increasingly vulnerable in the modern-day 21st century geopolitical environment, arising from globalization, connectivity and disruptions from the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR). Economic interdependency and the global free flow of ideas and information have increased the vulnerability of states to economic and political-social disruptions across multiple fronts of inter-state competition and conflicts short of war. In this complex, dynamic and uncertain geopolitical environment of the 21st century, sovereign states engage in geopolitical competition below the threshold level of war within a *Grey Zone* to preserve their sovereignty and advance their national interests. This is especially so for *non-Great Power states*—middle powers and small states—which have inherent limitations to its power and influence and do not have the capacities like great powers to coerce and compel others to do their will. The non-Great Power state must employ all available instruments of its national power coherently through *grand strategy-making* in order to wield soft power and compete effectively in the Grey Zone against coercion to preserve their sovereignty and advance their national interests.

Key words: *Grey Zone, Instruments of National Power, Grand Strategy, Small States, Middle Powers*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is an analysis of the modern-day geopolitical environment of the Grey Zone and what it means for the non-Great Power state—middle powers and small states—which have inherent limitations and weaknesses. The existing international relations and security studies literature on instruments of national power (the 'DIME') and grand strategy provide limited focus and heuristics for non-Great Power states to adapt within their strategic circumstances. This essay proposes a framework and principles to guide the non-Great Power state in the development of its grand strategy and employment of its instruments of national power for geopolitical competition in the Grey Zone. This essay would be a relevant discourse for students and practitioners of international relations and strategic studies.

INTRODUCTION

States are increasingly vulnerable in the modern-day 21st century geopolitical environment, arising from globalisation, connectivity and disruptions from the 4IR. Economic interdependency and the global free flow of ideas and information have increased the vulnerability of states to economic and political-social disruptions across multiple fronts of inter-state competition and conflicts short of war. In this complex, dynamic and uncertain geopolitical environment of the 21st century, sovereign states are constrained to engage in geopolitical competition below the threshold level of war within a Grey Zone to preserve their sovereignty

and advance their national interests. This is especially so for non-Great Power states—middle powers and small states—which have inherent limitations to its power and influence and do not have the capacities like great powers to coerce and compel others to do their will. As Thucydides famously narrated of the Melian Dialogue during the Peloponnesian War, 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.'¹ In this geopolitical reality of the 21st century, the non-Great Power state must employ all available instruments of its national power coherently through grand strategy-making in order to wield soft power and compete effectively in the Grey Zone.

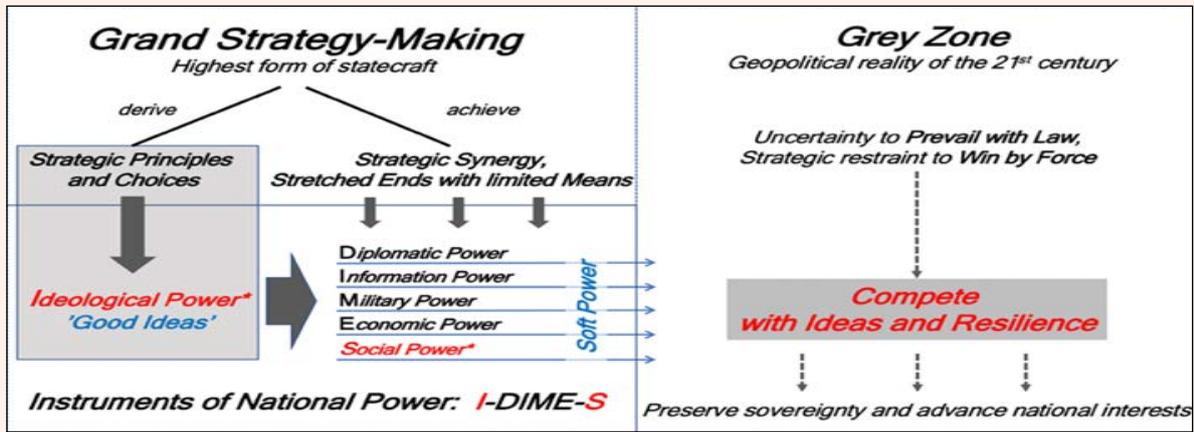


Figure 1: Research Thesis.

This essay examines a framework and principles for grand strategy-making by the non-Great Power state. It will argue that the Grey Zone is the geopolitical reality of the 21st century in which there is uncertainty for states to *Prevail with Law* and there are strategic restraints to *Win by Force*. Such a geopolitical environment compels non-Great Power states to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* to preserve their sovereignty and advance their national interests—with all instruments of national power. This grand strategy-making entails discerning strategic principles and making strategic choices to create *ideological power* as the fundamental instrument of national power (*good ideas*), and driving the coherent employment of other instruments of national power (the ‘DIME’ and *social power*) to achieve strategic synergy in a tight coupling for the pursuit of stretched ends with limited means.

COMPETING IN THE GREY ZONE

In order to understand the geopolitical reality of the 21st century, it is important to assess conflicts in the Grey Zone and what it means for the non-Great Power state. One of the early notable works was *Unrestricted Warfare*, a Chinese assessment of warfare describing an evolution of the battlefield to be ‘everywhere’ transcending ‘all boundaries and limits’ through the employment of military and non-military means, in ‘domains such as economy, finance, religion, and

culture to out-do the enemy’ to compel the adversary to do one’s will.² Western thinking has often referred to the concept of Hybrid Warfare, which was first conceived by the US military in the early 2000s describing warfare at the operational and tactical domains to be ‘multi-modal and multi-variant’ with the ‘convergence of the physical and psychological, the kinetic and nonkinetic, and combatants and noncombatants.’³ Hybrid warfare thinking has since evolved to a more strategic slant with a few strands described as Grey Zone warfare. One strand describes an ‘aggressive foreign policy approach’ for the control of territories that combines diplomatic statecraft, information operations, calibrated military operations, and economic leverage, such as the Russian annexation of Crimea and China’s actions in the South China Sea (SCS).⁴ Another strand describes the combination of means to achieve civil disruption—which could take the form of an ‘attack against companies and civil society’ to ‘wreak havoc on daily lives.’⁵ There is also Political Warfare, which was prominent during the Cold War when the US engaged in an ideological contest against the Soviet Union and communism—a ‘battle for influence’, targeting various stakeholders to erode the legitimacy of an adversary by undermining its political ideology and actions, through ‘the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war.’⁶

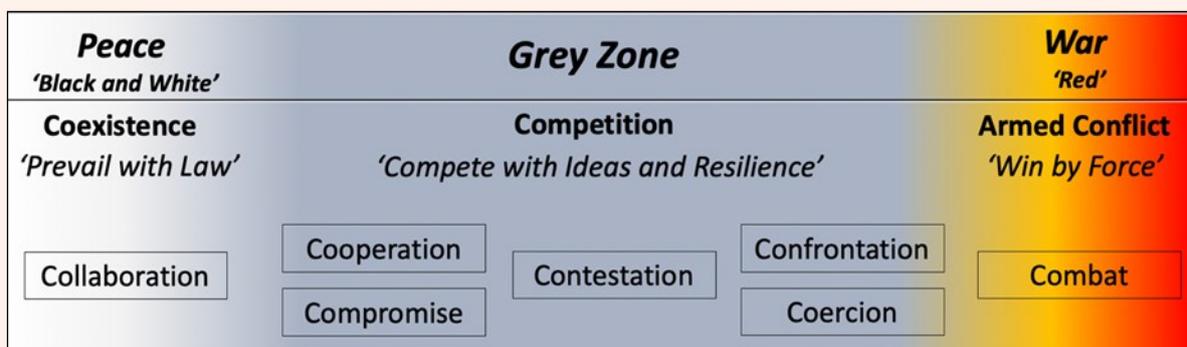


Figure 2: The Grey Zone.

These strands of thinking describe the modern-day Grey Zone as a geopolitical reality along a continuum between absolute peace and total war. There is uncertainty to *Prevail with Law* in peace and strategic restraint to *Win by Force* in war. Nevertheless, non-Great Power states need not be fatalistic to ‘suffer what they must’ and let ‘the strong do what they can’. The 21st century geopolitical environment provides the strategic space and opportunities for the non-Great Power state to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* in the Grey Zone to preserve its sovereignty and advance its national interests.

Prevailing with Law in Peace

The 21st century geopolitical environment is characterised by an eroding global order which is uncertain for states to *Prevail with Law*. At peace, a ‘black and white’ geopolitical environment governed by international law for collaboration between states is increasingly unpredictable. Morgenthau’s realist view of geopolitics describes that ‘the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power’ and that ‘universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states.’⁷ The ‘rules of the game’ are weak in the international context—‘Not only is the will-to-power allowed virtually free reign, but it is accentuated by the multiplicity of states whose individual sovereignty elevates each as a secular pinnacle of political and moral authority.’⁸ This realist perspective of international relations characterised by geopolitical power struggle invariably makes it uncertain for non-Great Power states to *Prevail with Law* in peace.

The dynamics of realpolitik are further aggravated in a multipolar geopolitical environment with increased agency, thus exacerbating the uncertainty for the non-Great Power state to *Prevail with Law*. The global order has been regulated by a precise and binding ‘international law ideology’—a set of principles which provide binary normative standards to govern the appropriate actions and behaviours of states. However, this international law ideology is being weakened with a broader ‘Rules-Based Order’ which is less precise and binding as a consequence of multipolarity.⁹ Other than this, the unreliability and inconsistency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in responding to

international security crises also erodes the global order. The UNSC’s ‘selective security’ approach to resolve international security crises in accordance with international law ideology was often subjected to the interests-based calculus of major powers, which often outweigh their obligations to intervene.¹⁰ The UNSC’s futility to act and its paralysis when its decisions were ignored undermined its legitimacy of the international law ideology—examples include the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, and China’s island building in the SCS. This eroding global order creates significant challenges and uncertainty for the non-Great Power state to *Prevail with Law*.

Winning by Force in War

The 21st century geopolitical environment is also characterised by the strategic inclination to avoid armed conflict at the ‘red’ end of the continuum. Most states, if not all, prepare themselves to *Win by Force* with the build-up of their armed forces as deterrence against coercion, imminent threats or armed aggression. As Machiavelli states, ‘the main foundations of every state, new states as well as ancient or composite ones, are good laws and good arms; and because you cannot have good laws without good arms, and where there are good arms, good laws will inevitably follow.’¹¹ In the context of the non-Great Power state, possessing ‘good arms’ would certainly provide better assurance that ‘good laws’ could be upheld and adhered to. Hence, the logic for the non-Great Power state to build up its military and be prepared to *Win by Force*.

Nevertheless, winning by force is certainly the last resort in the strategic calculus of states in the 21st century. Unlike the era of the world wars and before, states ‘improved its geopolitical position not by waging successful wars, but by avoiding military adventures.’¹² Favourable strategic outcomes are achieved not through winning by force—‘The greatest victory in living memory—of the United States over the Soviet Union—was achieved without any major military confrontation.’¹³ Violence had declined over long stretches of time and the 21st century is the ‘most peaceful era’ in human existence due to the ‘forces of modernity—reason, science, humanism, individual rights’ and ‘forces of civilisation and enlightenment.’¹⁴

These views argue that winning by force would always certainly be the last resort, especially for non-Great Power states.

Competing with Ideas and Resilience

With the uncertainty to *Prevail with Law* (even with ‘good laws’) and the strategic restraint to *Win by Force* (even with ‘good arms’), the non-Great Power state is therefore compelled to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* in the Grey Zone. The notion of competing in the Grey Zone to pursue national interests without entering into full scale armed conflict is not just a feature of the Cold War when political warfare first became prominent, or when the discourse on hybrid warfare surfaced in the 21st century. A key maxim from the Sun Tzu’ classic *Art of War* suggests that victory should be achieved by ‘subjugating other states without actually engaging in armed combat.’¹⁵ Clausewitz’s classic *On War* opines upfront that the ultimate ‘ends’ is to ‘compel our enemy to do our will’ and ‘war is merely the continuation of policy by other means.’¹⁶ Both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz allude to the pursuit of means other than war to achieve a state’s national interests, prior to ultimately pursuing war or armed conflict as a last resort.

The nature of competing below the threshold level of war is certainly not new, but it is increasingly complex in the 21st century. What differentiates the Grey Zone today from yesteryears is the multiple levers and wider strategic space for states to engage in multi-domain competition. Compared to the era of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, the modern-day geopolitical environment is characterised by the interdependence and interconnectedness of states, and with an established and functional structure of global order and norms for international relations. Such a geopolitical environment allows states to employ more means other than war as levers to pursue their national interests, and to influence others to fulfil their will through political pressure, geoeconomics, social influence, and information and cyberspace.¹⁷ States would engage in such competition against each other with these multi-domain levers across different ‘relationship vectors’ concurrently—collaborating, cooperating, compromising, contesting and confronting in what is framed as the ‘Competition Prism.’¹⁸ These multi-domain levers across these relationship vectors are not limited to only great

powers alone, and the non-Great Power state could similarly engage in geopolitical competition across these multi-domains in the modern-day Grey Zone.

There are two aspects to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience*. The first aspect is oriented *inwards* on the non-Great Power state itself—the principles and thinking which guide its strategic choices for the formulation of state policies and strategies given its strategic circumstances and context. This thinking is central to a definition of grand strategy, which describes grand strategy as ‘a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so.’¹⁹ Specifically, ideas for its foreign relations, national security, economy and social domains, and the building and strengthening of these areas for geopolitical influence and *resilience* in the multi-domain competition of the Grey Zone. The other aspect to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* is oriented *outwards*—establishing the state itself as an exemplar and the irrefutable logic of its ideas to enhance its legitimacy and attraction in the minds of the leaders and publics of other states—as ‘a city on the hill.’²⁰ Specifically, the influence of its *ideas* which would resonate with, gain support from or oblige other states, in order to preserve its sovereignty and advance its national interests in the Grey Zone.

With the uncertainty to *Prevail with Law* (even with ‘good laws’) and the strategic restraint to *Win by Force* (even with ‘good arms’), the non-Great Power state is therefore compelled to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* in the Grey Zone

This notion of *ideas* is a strategic essential for the non-Great Power state in the 21st century geopolitical environment. Machiavelli’s construct of ‘good laws’ and ‘good arms’ as the ‘main foundations of every state’

should be expanded to include *good ideas* for relevance in the 21st century. The *good ideas* of the non-Great Power state will generate soft power through the employment of other instruments of its national power for it to compete effectively in the Grey Zone.

INSTRUMENTS OF NATIONAL POWER

In international relations and strategic studies, discourse on instruments of national power revolves around *Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic*—the ‘DIME’. Specifically, the utility of these instruments as means for the state in geopolitical conflicts, and collective recognition that military operations and economic sanctions alone may be insufficient. This increasing need to employ the DIME in the conduct of international relations in the form of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power approaches is ‘available to all states’.²¹ Hard power is coercion, mostly with the use of military and economic powers, and soft power is co-optation and persuasion which relies on diplomatic and information powers but supported by the employment of military and economic powers in less coercive ways. In an era of global information and power diffusion, soft power will become increasingly important as compared to hard power.²² These considerations suggest that non-Great Power states, despite their inherent limitations and weaknesses for hard power, could similarly employ all instruments of its national power to achieve strategic outcomes in the modern-day geopolitical environment. Other than the traditional DIME, there is value in considering *ideological* and *social* power as instruments of national power for the non-Great Power state to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience in the Grey Zone*.

The DIME for the non-Great Power State

Foreign Relations and Narratives of the State: Diplomatic and Information Powers

The diplomatic and information powers of the state are the primary instruments for soft power and are critical for the non-Great Power state to compete in the Grey Zone. Soft power is ‘the ability to get preferred

outcomes through co-optive means of agenda-setting, persuasion, and attraction’, and reduces the need to rely on ‘carrots and stick’ to compel others.²³ What this means is that the non-Great Power state, often without much ‘carrots’ or a big ‘stick’ as hard power to compel others, has to rely more on its foreign relations and narratives for soft power instead to enhance its attraction and legitimacy in order to compete in the Grey Zone.

The non-Great Power state needs to rely on its diplomatic power to communicate its ideas and perspectives to elicit support and agreement from other states on specific issues, as well as to forge alliances and partnerships with like-minded states. An important aspect of diplomatic power is leveraging prevailing global norms and institutions. Law is a strategic instrument in geopolitics, and states should ‘use some combination of a legal regime, legal sources, or legal processes in combination with other instruments of national power to significantly increase its opportunity to advance its strategic interests on the international stage.’²⁴ While not relying solely on prevailing with law, the non-Great Power state must nevertheless continue to leverage law and global norms in the conduct of foreign relations to enhance its diplomatic power to oblige, co-opt and persuade in its negotiations.

The non-Great Power state must also focus on employing its information power — the use of strategic narratives to influence various geopolitical actors with its *good ideas*. Strategic narratives are means for political actors to ‘extend their influence’ through the construction of ‘shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.’²⁵ The centrality of such influence is key to power in the Grey Zone—to shape decision-making, perceptions and opinion.²⁶ Given the phenomenon of a ‘global network society’ arising from global interconnectedness, the non-Great Power state must therefore leverage its information power to effectively influence multiple audiences in its geopolitical environment in order to co-opt, persuade and attract.²⁷

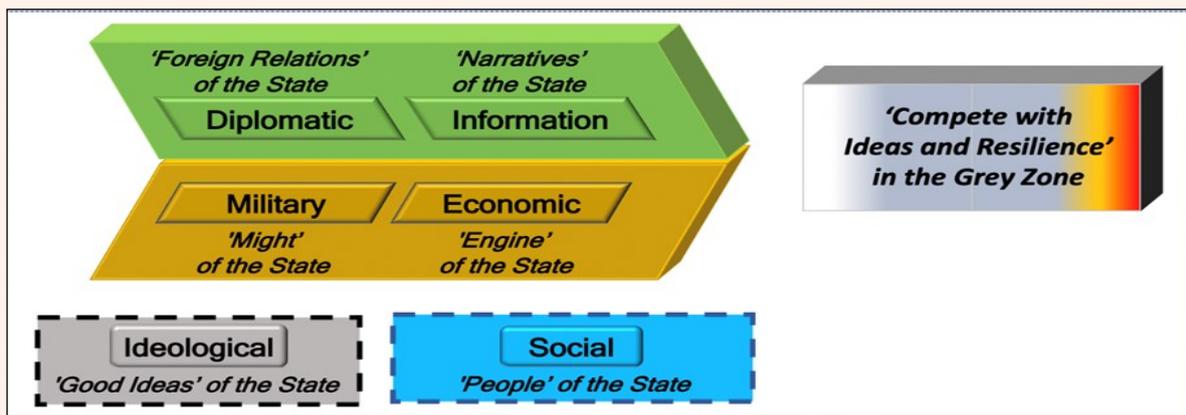


Figure 3: Instruments of National Power.

Might and Engine of the State: Military and Economic Powers

The military and economic powers of the state are the primary instruments for hard power approaches but can be harnessed as forms of soft power, in support of the diplomatic and information powers of the non-Great Power state to enhance its *resilience* to compete in the Grey Zone. A well-equipped and competent armed force is still essential as its ultimate guarantor for its security—‘good arms’. Nevertheless, its military-to-military cooperation, alliances or partnerships with other states, and military deployment in peace support and humanitarian operations, can be a source of deterrence and attraction to enhance its foreign relations and narratives. Such employment of military power through ‘benignity, competence, legitimacy and trust’ is a form of soft power to support the ‘framing of agendas, persuasion, and attraction in world politics.’²⁸

In terms of economic power, the non-Great Power state needs to rely on the success and attraction of its economic model and institutions for soft power. The non-Great Power state likely does not have the underlying economic capabilities to wield or effectively employ geoeconomic instruments such as sanctions, aid, or the control of finance, energy and commodities. Geoeconomic power is a function of ‘certain structural features or geoeconomic endowments’ which ‘dictate how effective a country is likely to be in the use of geoeconomic tools.’²⁹ Therefore, the economic power for the non-Great Power state is its ability to be resilient against such geoeconomic influence and coercion with its economic model, institutions, and strategy. The might and engine of the non-Great Power state are relatively weaker in terms of hard power but nevertheless can be employed to generate soft power

to support the foreign relations and narratives of the state, and enhance its *resilience* in the Grey Zone.

Ideological Power – The Good Ideas of the State

An insight from the concept of soft power is about the potential of ideas in geopolitical competition. Soft power is ‘the ability to affect others... persuading, and eliciting positive attraction’ through state diplomacy with ‘intangible factors such as institutions, ideas, values, culture.’³⁰ This alludes to the argument on the influence of strategic culture, state ideology and identity—the ‘socially constructed nature of the state and its interest’—as a central dimension in international relations.³¹ Such arguments suggest that strategic culture and its manifestations of state identity, values and ideas are critical elements of soft power and could be seen as an instrument of national power for competition in the Grey Zone.

The effectiveness of each instrument of power in the DIME is fundamentally a function of *good ideas*—how they are employed. The *good ideas* of the state provide the stratagems for its foreign relations, the legitimacy for its narratives, and the discerning logic for its security and economic strategies. Ideas are impactful in international relations and geopolitics — ‘Ideas have power because they fundamentally shape the behaviour of humans and affect how we process information’, and can be harnessed by states to ‘advance security interests and improve the conditions of the society they serve.’³² Ideas are not only powerful narratives oriented outwards to influence other states and external audiences, but also inwards to shape the state’s policies across all aspects in domestic governance. The good ideas of the non-Great Power state, both inwards and

outwards, are foundations to the strength and effectiveness of its DIME and overall soft power in the Grey Zone.

The *good ideas* of the state are ideological in nature, deeply rooted and emerge from its strategic culture, national identity and values—not just simply innovative and bright ideas. Strategic culture is the ‘prime mover of thought, judgment, policy, and all that follows therefrom’, and the ‘most important source of the moral factors’ that are central to conflicts.³³ Strategic culture provides the rationality for strategic thinking and is ‘solidified in national memory and identity.’³⁴ Based on these arguments, the manifestation of strategic culture as national identity and values shapes the *good ideas* of the state. These *good ideas* are powerful forces influencing a state in its international relations and domestic governance, and create ideological power that in itself is an instrument of national power in geopolitics. Ideological power is vital for the non-Great Power state to drive the coherent employment of the other instruments of national power, enhancing its soft power to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* in the Grey Zone.

Social Power – The People of the State

In this 21st century geopolitical environment of the Grey Zone, the conventional approach to deterrence with diplomacy and military, even with the support of information and economic powers driven by ideological power may not be sufficient. Human societies and ‘social power’ are a critical feature in the history of geopolitics.³⁵ There is a need to examine the social dimensions of power, as ‘societies fight wars, too’ and the people of the state arguably has an instrumental role in geopolitical competition in the Grey Zone.³⁶ This is because of the vulnerabilities and risks of the civil society for adversaries to create havocs in daily lives through cyber-attacks on critical state infrastructure and systems, disruption of trade, and disinformation campaigns.³⁷ Thus the need for ‘modern deterrence’ in the Grey Zone to focus on the *resilience* of the population—‘what is needed is a critical mass of citizens who know how to prepare for a crisis, how to respond during it, and how to identify disinformation.’³⁸ This phenomenon highlights the ‘centrality of the social realm’ as the ‘decisive battleground in interstate conflict

and competition’, as it is contested in an unprecedented manner in the 21st century geopolitical environment of the Grey Zone, and that the people of the state are increasingly at the frontline subjected to malign interference and coercion and they need to be ‘agents of national resilience.’³⁹ The people of the non-Great Power state must be an instrument of its national power in the Grey Zone.

Social power is a function of human capital and social capital. ‘Great demographics’, in terms of human capital as a result of the size, capabilities, and characteristics of populations, provide decisive advantages for great powers in long-term geopolitical competition.⁴⁰ Although this argument is about US ‘demographic exceptionalism’ to prevail in great power competition, the notion of human capital as a key component of social power is also equally, if not more, relevant for the non-Great Power state who already has inherent limitations and weaknesses in other instruments of national power. The non-Great Power state may not be able to achieve demographic exceptionalism with the size of its population, but it certainly can enhance the characteristics and capabilities of its people to strengthen their resilience against geoeconomic competition, disruption and shocks in the Grey Zone.

In addition to human capital, social capital is critical in building the resilience of the people against geopolitical competition in the Grey Zone. Social capital is the unity or cohesiveness of the population—connections amongst individuals, their trust amongst each other from perceived and shared identity relations, or from collective activity together.⁴¹ Notably, the state-society relationship is also instrumental to social capital. This requires ‘citizens to see and to believe that government makes real and valued net contributions to citizens’ lives, in order to earn their support for, and trust in the state.’⁴² Such state-society cohesion is essential to build ‘people power’ and societal resilience in today’s networked world.⁴³ The notion of social capital is critical for the non-Great Power state which likely has a smaller population, and would need its people to be more united and be aligned to its *good ideas*.

The centrality of the social realm in the 21st century geopolitical environment must be appreciated

by the non-Great Power state. The quality of its people and cohesion of its society are perhaps the most wieldable power instrument for the non-Great Power state. Social power is the critical element for modern deterrence and enables the non-Great Power state to be resilient in its geopolitical competition in the Grey Zone against economic competition, civil disruptions, foreign influence and disinformation. The non-Great Power state needs to build and enhance its human and social capital to harness its social power, together with the employment of other instruments of power to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* in the Grey Zone.

The non-Great Power state need to formulate *good ideas* in order to integrate the foreign relations, narratives, might, engine and people of the state coherently to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* effectively in the Grey Zone.

GRAND STRATEGY-MAKING IN THE GREY ZONE

Why Grand Strategy-Making for the non-Great Power State

The non-Great Power state need to formulate good ideas in order to integrate the foreign relations, narratives, might, engine and people of the state coherently to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* effectively in the Grey Zone. This can only be achieved with grand strategy-making—the ‘highest form of statecraft’ which integrates ‘all forms of national power’ to achieve political aims.⁴⁴ Strategy is about making choices and is the ‘art of creating power’ to ‘getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest.’⁴⁵ Grand strategy-making is a strategic imperative for the non-Great Power state in the modern-day geopolitical environment, in order to make the most out of its relatively weaker and less dominant instruments of national power. Grand strategy-making would allow the non-Great Power state to appreciate and comprehend its strategic principles

and choices, identify its core national interests and priorities (‘ends’) in its prevailing strategic context to generate *good ideas*, and thereafter pursue *strategic synergy* from the coherent employment of its instruments of national power (‘means’) to achieve those ends in the Grey Zone.

Strategic Principles and Choices

The starting point for *good ideas* and harnessing the ideological power of the non-Great Power state is comprehending on its strategic principles and choices and identifying its strategic ends. In the grand strategy-making process, the fundamental step is the appreciation and interpretation of strategic circumstances and environment—‘clear understanding of the nature of the international environment, a country’s highest goals and interests within that environment, the primary threats to those goals and interests.’⁴⁶ This stage of strategic thought is heavily influenced by the strategic mindsets of the non-Great Power state—its strategic culture, identity and values. While these strategic mindsets may provide sensibility to past tragedies and strategic learning, it may also lead to rigid or biased perspectives in the interpretation of its prevailing strategic environment. Therefore, the non-Great Power state would need to have agility in its strategic thought and be discerning in the interpretation of its prevailing strategic context. Such a discerning appreciation of its strategic circumstances would allow the non-Great Power state to derive clear strategic principles and choices, and enable the development of rational *good ideas* as ideological power to drive and integrate the purposeful employment of the other instruments of national power.

Ends-Means and Strategic Synergy

The clarity of strategic principles and choices for rational good ideas is important, due to the relatively weaker and less dominant means of the non-Great Power state. These rational good ideas would be able to drive and integrate the other instruments of national power purposefully and coherently, achieving *strategic synergy* to enhance the overall power of its limited means in pursuit of *stretched* strategic ends. An important aspect of grand strategy-making is ‘aligning aspirations with capabilities’—the appreciation of

strengths and weaknesses, and the ‘tight coupling of ends with means.’⁴⁷ This argument suggests the need to calibrate strategic ends downwards within limited capabilities. While this is certainly important to prevent strategic overstretch, calibrating policy ends downwards for non-Great Power states may mean compromising on its higher intended aims and desired outcomes. Grand strategy-making is also a process to *integrate means to serve great ends*, and to have *selective ends* to preserve the employment of means purposefully—in what is termed as ‘equilibrium between means and ends.’⁴⁸ What this means is the need for the non-Great Power state to integrate its limited means purposefully in order to achieve strategic synergy, thus enhancing its overall power and capabilities to pursue great and selective ends instead of compromising on its stretched ends. Integrating limited means for *strategic synergy* can be achieved from the *coherence* of ideological power with other instruments of national power.

Key Thrusts for Strategic Synergy

The coherence of ideological power with the other instruments of national power is required to achieve strategic synergy. Such coherence can be achieved with four key thrusts in a grand strategy framework—aligning and integrating the limited means of the non-Great Power state to its rational *good ideas*, creating strategic synergy for the pursuit of great and selective ends.

Ideological-Diplomatic-Military Power Coherence: National Security

The first key thrust is ideological-diplomatic-military power coherence for national security—the approach and strategy for foreign relations and defence based on strategic principles and choices. The non-Great Power state should formulate its national security

thinking from its history, memory of tragedies, geographic reality and prevailing geopolitical atmospherics in its region. The clarity of its strategic principles and choices must be translated into practical and coherent foreign relations approach and defence strategy. The foreign relations approach would guide the non-Great Power state in the geopolitical issues it should promote, support and lobby for, the types of relations it should seek with other states in its region and globally, and its diplomatic rules of engagement—choices of behaviour to either cooperate, compromise, contest, confront or coerce in different situations with different states on different issues. The defence strategy must then align to the considerations of foreign relations for the development of its military capabilities to achieve the required missions and specific tasks, as well as to determine the types of defence cooperation and partnerships it should seek with other states.

The US strategy of containment against the Soviet Union is a case-in-point on ideological-diplomatic-military power coherence (and with economic power). Its strategic principles and choices for an international order of self-determinism, democracy and capitalism led to its national security approach of the ‘Truman doctrine’ in the conduct of its foreign relations and military strategy in Eurasia—particularly with the rehabilitation of Germany and Japan, the political influence and economic support for other European countries, and the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁴⁹ Such ideological-diplomatic-military power coherence was required even for a great power like the US to achieve its strategic objectives during the Cold War. For the non-Great Power state, ideological-diplomatic-military power coherence is even more critical to achieve its national security outcomes of creating and maintaining geopolitical space, deterring against potential adversaries and preserving its sovereignty.



Figure 4: Grand Strategy Framework.

Ideological-Economic Power Coherence: Economic Resilience

The second key thrust is ideological-economic power coherence for economic resilience—developing and sustaining the economy based on strategic principles and choices. In this interdependent and interconnected world of the 21st century subjected to geoeconomic competition and coercion, the non-Great Power state must be able to withstand trade disruptions and shocks, and to recover and persist against competition and economic coercions in the Grey Zone. The non-Great Power state's appreciation of its geographic reality provides clear strategic principles and choices for its economic model and strategy—the structure of its economy, its extent of free market and diversification, its trading partners and balance of bilateral trade, and its critical sectors for tighter governance and investment. Its economic model and strategy must also consider national security, so as to avoid bifurcation of economic and security interests. The concept of 'flow and friction' describes that in the modern geopolitical-economic world, 'countries will fail unless they are open to flows' but they also 'need sensible frictions to gain the upside while minimizing the downside' of the interdependent and interconnected world economy.⁵⁰ The ideological-economic power coherence (including coherence with diplomatic-military) will guide the non-Great Power state in determining the 'sensible frictions' required for its economic model and strategy given its strategic context. This would enhance the resilience of its economy against the dynamism and cycles of the modern global economy, and more importantly to insulate against or minimize foreign coercion through geoeconomic levers in the Grey Zone.

Ideological-Social Power Coherence: Population Resilience

The third key thrust is ideological-social power coherence for population resilience—building human and social capital based on strategic principles and choices. The centrality of social power necessitates the non-Great Power state to have a people strategy to develop and mobilize its people not only to resource its economy and military requirements, but importantly to

harness societal cohesion and patriotism to enhance their resilience against disinformation and disruptive foreign influence in this interdependent and interconnected world of the 21st century. Ideological power is critical for social power. The strategic principles and choices of the non-Great Power state must not only drive the thinking for its people strategy to develop human capital, but also *resonate with its people* to enhance social capital. The non-Great Power state must engage and align its people to its strategic principles and choices—ideals and values, national security conversations and domestic policy reasoning. Sun Tzu states that 'Tao'—reason or principle—which 'causes the people to be fully in accord with the ruler', is the first factor in preparing for war or conflicts.⁵¹ The application of this maxim in the context of geopolitical competition in the Grey Zone is the alignment of the people to the ideology of the state. This ideological-social power coherence would allow the non-Great Power state to harness trust and support for the government in its national security and economic decisions, and to build resilience against foreign influence in its geopolitical competition in the Grey Zone.

Ideological-Information Power Coherence: Strategic Communication

The fourth key thrust is ideological-information power coherence for strategic communication—communicating clear and consistent messages, and the irrefutable logic of its strategic principles and choices across all domains of state actions to influence others. The non-Great Power state must communicate its strategic intentions, as well as its strategic perspectives and decisions effectively to potential adversaries, other states and to its people, across its national security, economic and social pursuits. This would support and enhance the employment and effectiveness of other instruments of national power.

Strategic communication from ideological-information power coherence would allow the non-Great Power state to influence its people and other states with its strategic principles and fundamental ideas, steering them towards alignment with its strategic thinking for its desired outcomes. This is the essence of 'narrative alignment'—'getting others at

home and abroad to buy in to your strategic narrative can shape their interests, their identity, and their understanding of how international relations works and where it is heading.⁵² This would create and expand its geopolitical space to preserve its sovereignty and advance its national interests in the Grey Zone— increase cooperation, oblige compromise, reduce contestation from adversaries, and build like-mindedness and garner wider support and partnerships for agenda-setting and hedging against coercion and confrontation.

What's New and Will it Work

The proposed grand strategy framework appears to be basic fundamentals for the governance of a state by its leaders. It certainly is, as 'grand strategic choices are inherent in the process of governing.'⁵³ Yet not every government, democratic or autocratic, gets it right within their unique strategic and geopolitical circumstances, or is discerningly clear and coherent with their strategic principles and choices for its national security, economy, and people. Incoherent or ineffective employment of instruments of national power could be oversights, incompetence, deliberate decisions or lack of resolve to maintain its strategic thinking against opposing geopolitical dynamics and domestic pressures. Strategy-making is profoundly a human-centric process subjected to flaws, with the inherent problems of complexity, circumstance, friction and prediction.⁵⁴ That said, grand strategy-making is that crucial human-centric factor which could lead and cohere the non-Great Power state in its endeavor to be successful in the Grey Zone.⁵⁵ The proposed grand strategy framework could provide the perspectives and

insights for this human-centric endeavor in the effective governance of the non-Great Power state against geopolitical dynamics and domestic pressures. The Singapore Story provides some examples and insights (See *Case Study*). This framework could provide useful analysis for the strategic thinking and approach of other non-Great Power states in various regions of unique strategic circumstances for policy-making—Australia in the Southwest Pacific, Japan in East Asia, Germany and France in Europe, and Israel in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

In the modern-day Grey Zone, the non-Great Power state needs to appreciate the primacy of ideological power and the centrality of social power, in addition to the traditional DIME. With its inherent lack of relative strength and capacities, the non-Great Power state must engage in grand strategy-making. Grand strategy-making is a strategic imperative for the non-Great Power state to create and wield soft power to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* in the Grey Zone—generating *good ideas* as its ideological power to align and cohere its diplomatic, military, economic, social and information powers for strategic synergy, in order to build and sustain *resilience* in pursuit of its national interests and stretched strategic ends.

Grand strategy is not a 'silver bullet' or a panacea to resolve all the challenges of the non-Great Power state and emerge as a great power. Grand strategy-making, is however, the 'first bullet' the non-Great Power state must have in order to *Compete with Ideas and Resilience* in the Grey Zone, and to *not always* 'suffer what they must' and let the 'strong do what they can'.

CASE STUDY: THE SINGAPORE STORY

Singapore is a small city-state in Southeast Asia with an advanced economy, skilled workforce, sophisticated military force, united population, global credibility and reputation. Over a short period, Singapore has not only survived from the sudden circumstances of its independence in 1965, but also progressed to be a first-world nation which ‘punch above its weight’ on the regional and global stage. Although Singapore’s success can be attributed to its strategic location in the era of globalization and Pax Americana, the strategic thought of its founding and present generation of leaders is worth examining. Singapore has certainly engaged in grand strategic thinking to chart its extraordinary success, and provides the exemplar to understand the grand strategy-making framework proposed in this essay—the use of rational good ideas in its strategic context as ideological power to coherently and consistently align and drive the other instruments of national power across the four key thrusts to achieve strategic synergy for stretched strategic ends.

Singapore’s good ideas are its underlying principles in its grand strategy-making: stay open and connected to the world, be useful and relevant to the world, promote global order, maintain non-alignment, be self-reliant for security, and build social mobility and cohesion.

THE SINGAPORE ‘GOOD IDEAS’

Singapore’s good ideas are its underlying principles in its grand strategy-making: stay open and connected to the world, be useful and relevant to the

world, promote global order, maintain non-alignment, be self-reliant for security, and build social mobility and cohesion. The fall of British-ruled Singapore to Japan in the second World War and the circumstances of its independence were constructed in its national memory and explained Singapore’s siege mentality and sense of vulnerability in the geographical realities of its region. As an island without natural resources, separation from Malaysia in 1965 left Singapore without an economic hinterland, and Britain’s planned withdrawal of its troops by 1971 left Singapore with the need to rapidly build up its own defence.⁵⁶ Such strategic circumstances shaped the strategic mindsets of its leaders. Singapore’s first Prime Minister (PM), the late Lee Kuan Yew remarks, ‘a small country must seek a maximum number of friends, while maintaining the freedom to be itself as a sovereign and independent nation.’⁵⁷ We must make ourselves relevant so that other countries have an interest in our continued survival and prosperity as a sovereign and independent nation’. The late President S.R. Nathan also emphasizes, ‘we cannot just depend on others for our own survival and must be able to take our fate and future in our own hands.’⁵⁸ Long-time Foreign minister S. Jayakumar reflects that ‘small states cannot survive and thrive in a world which the interaction amongst states is governed by relative power and not by law.’⁵⁹ These statements aptly reflect Singapore’s *good ideas*.

NATIONAL SECURITY THINKING OF ‘THE LITTLE RED DOT’

Singapore achieved strategic synergy with ideological-diplomatic-military power coherence for national security. Singapore’s strategic principles of *non-alignment* and *self-reliant for security* guided its mutually supporting foreign relations approach and defence strategy from the early years of independence to the present day. The current Foreign Minister, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, emphasises that Singapore ‘must not become a vassal state’ and aims to be ‘a friend to all, but an enemy of none.’⁶⁰ He further explains that Singapore develops a wide network of relations with

other states, but relations must be based on mutual respect for sovereignty and the national interests of Singapore comes first—‘we cannot be bought nor can we be bullied’. Singapore’s non-alignment policy and principles-based approach explain how it dealt with major powers such as the US and China on different occasions bilaterally and in multilateral meetings as an interlocutor and strategic partner, but also ‘not hesitated to stand its ground when the occasion demands.’⁶¹ Singapore has maintained such a posture in the period of Pax Americana and even with the emergence of China—‘a non-alignment policy gives Singapore a greater freedom of manoeuvrability on specific issues based on its national interests.’⁶²

Singapore is an active regional and global player, aligning with its strategic principles to be *useful and relevant to the world* and to *promote global order*. As PM Lee Hsien Loong remarks on Singapore foreign relations, ‘we have to be an active and constructive player’ and ‘bring something to the table.’⁶³ Lee emphasises that Singapore must continue to play an active role in strengthening the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as one of its founding members to promote the rule of law, regional stability and cooperative security through multilateral forums with regional powers—‘ASEAN is the cornerstone of our foreign policy’.

Singapore has indeed played a critical role in ASEAN multilateral platforms to contribute to regional peace and security.⁶⁴ Lee also recounts that Singapore played an active central role in the negotiations of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) because the rights to freedom of navigation and overflight, and the rule of law in general are critical for Singapore as a maritime state.⁶⁵ As a proponent of free trade, what started as its negotiation for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Brunei, Chile and New Zealand progressed to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations, and eventually became the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for TPP (CPTPP) with 11 countries.⁶⁶ These are examples of how Singapore’s strategic principles translate to the priorities of its foreign relations—which agenda it supports and pursue, what types of relationships with which countries, and its norms for diplomatic engagement—an effective demonstration of

ideological-diplomatic power coherence to expand its diplomatic space for national security.

Singapore’s defence strategy is anchored on its enduring determination to rely on itself for security. This strategic principle has guided its defence planning and resource commitments over the years. Singapore justified the absolute necessity of a compulsory National Service (NS) system to build up the size and capabilities of its armed forces when Britain withdrew and resourced it with a steady, prudent and consistent approach to defence spending to reflect its commitment for peace and security.⁶⁷ The Singapore Armed Forces has since evolved to a full spectrum fighting force with technologically advanced Army, Navy, and Air Force — rated by Lowy Institute amongst the best in the Southeast Asia region.⁶⁸ This self-reliant defence strategy provides better assurance for its security and importantly, supports its non-alignment policy. By not depending on others for its security, Singapore avoids obliging itself with alliance commitments or taking sides on other geopolitical conflicts and thus compromise its principled-based positions which are anchored on its own national interests.

ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND STRATEGIC DILEMMAS

Singapore achieved strategic synergy with ideological-economic power coherence by balancing its strategic dilemmas between long-term economic growth and security—equilibrium between ‘flows and frictions’. Singapore’s strategic principle to *stay open and connected to the world* guided its resolve with its economic strategy. With no natural resources but a small population and strategic location, Singapore has evolved into ‘an economic dynamo, a miracle of well-crafted institutional design’ embracing an ‘oceanic revolution’ as a maritime city-state.⁶⁹ ‘Singapore would go beyond the immediate neighbours to find friends... reach out long distance to create new economic hinterlands for itself.’⁷⁰ A key success factor is the network of FTAs Singapore established over the years— 11 regional and 14 bilateral FTAs, although they occasionally led to negative domestic perceptions over competition for jobs and survivability of local businesses.⁷¹ In advocating Singapore’s impetus to

remain open for economic recovery from COVID-19, its Trade minister emphasizes that ‘at a time when protectionist sentiments is on the rise globally, Singapore must remain open to the world in order to attract investments and create good jobs’ and that ‘the more FTAs we have... the more effective we are in attracting investments and creating jobs.’⁷² Staying open and connected to the world is Singapore’s formula for success given its strategic circumstances, and it has continuously embraced an open economy and persevered against domestic pressures even with regional and global competition or waves of economic crises over the last few decades.

Singapore’s economic strategy of staying open for growth with a free market capitalist approach is at odds with another strategic principle on being *self-reliant for security*. From an economic perspective, this meant retaining control over critical sectors of the free economy to guarantee access to technology and resources but possibly at the expense of long-term economic competitiveness. ‘Singapore remains one of the most resilient economies in Asia’ with a diversified economy to respond swiftly and effectively to shocks.⁷³ However, it is ‘unbalanced, with disproportionate roles for government-linked and multinational companies’ resulting in weak local private enterprises, which are critical for sustaining its future growth.⁷⁴ Government-Linked Companies (GLCs) were established in the 1960s to jumpstart the economy and create jobs in areas of ‘finance, telecommunications, transport and logistics, property, infrastructure and engineering, and utilities.’⁷⁵ As the economy developed, these GLCs were corporatised to reap the efficiencies and competitiveness of market-driven ownership and had continued to prosper regionally and globally as private enterprises. Nevertheless, a government established company manages investments in ‘first-tier’ GLCs and in some cases, government entities fully own specific enterprises. The Singapore government indicated the intention to ‘retain majority or significant stakes’ over ‘GLCs that perform activities which are strategic and crucial.’⁷⁶ Maintaining such degree of control in strategic industries and essential services guarantee access to technology and resources, and also enhance

Singapore’s security and resilience in the Grey Zone against geoeconomic coercion. Over the last few decades, Singapore has innovated and evolved its economic mechanisms for competitiveness and growth yet maintaining strategic control. It was able to align to competing strategic principles given its inherent economic risks and limitations as a small state, and yet resilient in macroeconomic terms as an advanced economy and against potential geoeconomic coercion or foreign influence.

DEVELOPING AND MOBILISING PEOPLE

Singapore achieved strategic synergy from ideological-social power coherence, with multiplier effects across other instruments of national power. Singapore’s strategic principle of *building social mobility and cohesion* is at the crux of its people strategy. At independence, its small diverse population was relatively unskilled with low literacy and had no common identity as a nation.⁷⁷ Given the economic and social circumstances, its founding leaders understood the existential need to develop and mobilise its people—its only resource. Singapore invested in its education system to enhance social mobility, building the human capital required to support its economy. Singapore pursued a ‘policy of advancing in education’ more than any other country in the world and is widely recognised as one of the world’s ‘most advanced and successful education systems’—education spending is second behind the defence budget.⁷⁸ Singapore’s social mobility and the progress of its economy contributed to the trust and confidence between the people and the government over the years—an important factor in uniting the country and building social cohesion.

Singapore strengthened its social cohesion with the concept of Total Defence (TD). The TD initiative started in 1984 on the belief that military defence is insufficient for security and that ‘the mobilisation of the entire nation, its people and its resources, would be as vital to the defence of the country.’⁷⁹ Other than ‘military’, the other pillars of TD are ‘civil’, ‘economic’, ‘social’, ‘psychological’, and a recent addition ‘digital.’⁸⁰ Each pillar communicates a narrative of its importance to the security, survival and success of Singapore, and that every citizen can do their part in any sector of the

society. TD campaigns were infused into the education system and monumental national events annually. Of note are ‘social defence’—advocating a united multi-racial society that works in harmony to contribute to national and societal goals, ‘psychological defence’—the Singapore identity, confidence in Singapore’s future and the resolve to defend its way of life, and ‘digital defence’—individual vigilance against online falsehoods or fake news, and cyber awareness in the information age. These three pillars strengthened Singapore’s social capital to enhance the people’s resilience against disinformation and disruptive foreign influence and coercion in the Grey Zone.

Over the years, Singapore’s leaders have been successful in gaining the support of its people to be united in their purpose and ideals to support the country in its national security, economic and social policies. As PM Lee remarks, ‘to be successful, we have to be one united people—united politically and also united as a cohesive multi-racial society.’⁸¹ This positive social capital in Singapore is reflected in its election outcomes—with the ruling political party winning all 13 general elections since the 1960s with an average popular vote share of close to 60-65%.⁸² The Singapore government had provided stability, efficiency, incorruptibility and consistency of policy to gain the trust of its people.⁸³ Singapore’s TD concept and its world-class education system, aligned by its strategic principles, were able to mobilise its people and harness social power to be a central instrument of national power in its grand strategy across multi-domains over the years.

IMPACTFUL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Singapore has achieved strategic synergy with ideological-information power coherence through strategic narratives from its foreign relations, military activities and its economic and social progress, to increase cooperation, oblige compromise, reduce contestation and hedge against coercion and confrontation in the Grey Zone. Of note are two examples of impactful strategic communication when Singapore communicated its strategic principles and ideals to enhance its soft power regionally and globally.

The way in which Singapore’s strategic narratives draw on notions of *non-alignment*, *relevance to the world*, and advocacy for *global order* led to positive impacts when it held the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2018. Singapore has the ‘ability to inspire’ and provide leadership in ASEAN, as its ‘neutrality and strong insistence on the rules-based order remain important pillars for sustaining the norms and rules of regional engagement’ across multiple security issues—the SCS dispute being one key issue.⁸⁴ While the various claimant states have yet to resolve their competing territorial claims, regional countries hoped to better manage the dispute through the Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS between China and the ASEAN stakeholders. Progress on the COC has been slow since the start of multilateral discussions in 2000. While Singapore is not a claimant state and does not take sides on the competing territorial claims of the SCS dispute, it sought to use its ‘diplomatic leadership, as ASEAN Chair and ASEAN country coordinator for China’ in 2018, to increase dialogue and cooperation, promote compromise and reduce contestation on the SCS—shaping the regional geopolitical atmospherics towards cooperative security and dialogue.⁸⁵ By end of 2018, the ASEAN member states and China had agreed on a single Draft Negotiating Text for the COC.⁸⁶ This was an impactful narrative to political observers on the strategic principles and ideals of what Singapore would stand up for—to be non-aligned and principles-based, and work with all parties to promote regional stability and cooperation. This also enhanced its credibility, legitimacy and attraction as a respectable and influential small state, thus creating and expanding geopolitical space to preserve its sovereignty and advance its national interests—Singapore is ranked 8th for Diplomatic Influence in the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index, leading all ASEAN countries.⁸⁷

The extent to which Singapore’s strategic narrative draws on the notion of being self-reliant for security was also impactful on another occasion concerning its existential interest—water security. Singapore relied heavily on imported raw water from Malaysia since independence in 1965. The two countries negotiated on Malaysia’s supply of raw water to Singapore, and Singapore’s sale of treated water to

Malaysia, under the '1961 agreement' for 50 years and '1962 agreement' for 99 years. The Water Agreements were further guaranteed by the Government of Malaysia in the 1965 Separation Agreement that established Singapore as an independent and sovereign state—this was registered with the United Nations. However, during his first term (1981-2003), then-Malaysian PM Mahathir (1981-2003) would threaten to cut off water supplies whenever there were bilateral disagreements—a geoeconomic and political lever.⁸⁸ Mahathir revived the long-standing tensions over water with Singapore again when he returned to power in 2018.⁸⁹ To reduce its water vulnerability, Singapore has invested over the years to develop technologies for recycled and desalinated water and would be self-sufficient for up to 85% of its water needs by 2060.⁹⁰

The recycled water ("NEWater") is key in Singapore's drive to be self-sufficient and a culmination of a three-decade search for alternative sources. During Singapore's National Day parade in 2002 attended by foreign dignitaries (including Malaysia's) and broadcasted by the media, Singaporeans drank NEWater with three resounding toasts. Nine years later in 2011 when the 1961 agreement lapsed, Singapore returned the land and facilities of the waterworks in Malaysia and stated that the 'adequacy of water supply is not affected.'⁹¹ After the 'desecuritisation' of the water issue, Singapore 'appears resilient enough and has sufficient water reserves for policy-makers to employ diplomatic and other non-violent means to resolve any disputes with Malaysia'—water is no longer a convenient geoeconomic lever.⁹²

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