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“Bridge” States in International Relations: The Cases of Singapore and Indonesia

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Abstract. The article examines the theoretical and practical aspects of the derivative power usage in international relations, as well as the concept of “bridge” states which connect different, and even competing, centers of power, thereby gaining their edge in the global arena. Consequently, the authors view such states as the actors most actively and efficiently using derivative power. Furthermore, the authors distinguish the specific features of the circulation approach to the phenomenon of power in international relations, as well as the characteristics of “bridge” states. The article distinguishes several features within political-geographic, historical-cultural, and legitimacy-based aspects. These include playing a balancing act between large states and groups with their membership, the absence of direct regional threats, ethno-cultural pluralism and also both internal and external acceptance of such a middle status. The theoretical part also explains the differences and similarities between neutral and “bridge” states, thereby facilitating a more profound comprehension of the latter category. Then, the authors analyze the foreign policies of Singapore and Indonesia, using a comparative method based on the basis of nine criteria. In this way, the article exemplifies possible variations from the ideal type, as well as it illustrates the ability of big actors, such as Indonesia, to use derivative power in foreign relations. It is worth pointing out that both the conceptual explanations and empirical data provided in the article facilitate further study of the internal and external conditions which determine whether a state gains or loses its “bridge” state status. Furthermore, the article shifts the focus from various groups and alliances to the types and principles of connectivity in international relations.

Key words: derivative power, circulation approach, connectivity, connecting elements, centers of power, neutral states

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Государства-«мосты» в международных отношениях на примере Сингапура и Индонезии

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Аннотация. Исследование посвящено анализу теоретических и практических аспектов использования деривативной силы в международных отношениях и концепции страны-«моста» — связующего звена между различными, в том числе и враждебными, центрами силы, опирающегося на свое промежуточное положение как конкурентное преимущество на мировой арене. Рассматривая подобные государства в качестве акторов, наиболее активно и эффективно использующих деривативную силу, авторы выявляют специфику циркуляционного подхода к феномену силы в международных отношениях и черты, присущие стране-«мосту». В рамках трех аспектов — политико-географического, историко-культурного и статусно-легитимного — в качестве характеристик, присущих государствам-«мостам», выделяются сбалансированность внешнеполитического курса по отношению к крупным государствам или группам с их участием, отсутствие прямых региональных угроз, этнокультурный плюрализм, а также внутреннее и внешнее принятие и признание посреднического статуса государств-«мостов». В теоретической части исследования также объяснены различия и сходства между нейтральным государством и страной-«мостом», что в значительной степени упрощает понимание последней категории. Опираясь на сравнительно-сопоставительный метод, в рамках которого проанализировано девять отличительных черт государств-«мостов», рассмотрена внешняя политика Сингапура и Индонезии, что позволяет не только выявить возможные отклонения от идеал-типической модели, но и продемонстрировать способность крупных акторов вроде Индонезии использовать деривативную силу в международных делах. Концептуальные объяснения и эмпирические данные исследования открывают широкие возможности для дальнейшего изучения внутренних и внешних условий приобретения и утраты статуса страны-«моста», а также создают предпосылки для смещения акцента с исследования групп и альянсов на изучение типов и принципов формирования связанности в международных отношениях.

Ключевые слова: деривативная сила, циркуляционный подход, связанность, связующее звено, центры силы, нейтральные государства

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Лошкарёв И.Д.: концептуализация, разработка методологии исследования, участие в написании рукописи. Копытцев И.С.: сбор данных, участие в написании рукописи. Оба автора ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

The field of international relations has gradually shifted its focus from great powers to other groups of states. In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars of international relations paid close attention to small states, which were found to sometimes have a noticeable influence, adjusting the policies of major global players to some extent (Amstrup, 1976; Baehr, 1975; Keohane, 1969; Krasnyak & Shaternikov, 2023). Subsequently, the topic of middle powers —

states with sufficient resources that have to neighbor or have historically interacted with more powerful states — emerged as a subject of interest (Jordaan, 2003; Vershinina, 2020; Vorontsov, Ponka & Varpahovskis, 2020; Kudryashova, 2008). One way or another, international studies have found a place for such states, which, while not necessarily determining the direction of the global world order, fulfil other equally important functions.

In this regard, the circular approach to the nature of power in international relations is again

in demand. Based on Parsons' metaphor, power should not be regarded as an attribute of the state (such as a set of resources or a position in the global hierarchy, etc.), but rather as an analogue of money. In a manner analogous to the circulation of money, power is also in global circulation, as well as it is exchanged and depreciated (Parsons, 1963). It is evident that the analogy between money and power is incomplete, since power is much more difficult to calculate and distribute among the participants in international relations (Deutsch, 1968, pp. 41–43). However, in the last decade, the circular approach has experienced a “second breath” within the framework of the concept of derivative power of British researcher T. Long, which posits that when states lack their own resources, they can utilize external sources of power to promote their interests (Long, 2017).

The phenomenon of relatively weak states seeking support from larger players is not a novel development. Back in 1981, M. Handel wrote about derivative sources of power, emphasizing that states with insufficient power potential could compensate for this through various forms of cultural and historical solidarity, temporary coalitions and the manipulation of positions of major powers (Handel, 1981, pp. 119–156). The novelty of the concept of derivative power lies in the specification of the peculiarities of such borrowing: derivative power is not designed for long-term use or for a wide range of purposes, it cannot be acquired or spent in an openly hostile external environment. Moreover, it relies on the developed diplomatic skill of the weaker state (Long, 2017, pp. 97–98). Moreover, derivative power requires a geographical or other state of in-betweenness, or a boundary, between some major powers or their economic and politico-military blocs (Kaul, 2022). Accordingly, derivative power differs from some other types of power to which the ability to circulate between actors in international relations is attributed (Katzenstein & Seybert, 2018; Loshkariov, 2021).

The question that naturally follows is: which group of states is most capable of using this type

of power? The present study hypothesizes that such a group is the “bridge” states, which have not yet been sufficiently conceptualized in Russian international political science. Our study proceeds from the thesis of the constructivist theoretical school that the status and functional groups of countries in international relations arise due to constitutive relationships (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Wendt, 1999). In other words, derivative power as a distinct type of power is capable of generating a distinct variety of states that use the situation to their advantage.

Taking into account that some theses about “bridges” in international relations have previously been put forward, this study is divided into three parts, in which the main characteristics of “bridge” states (political-geographical, historical-cultural and status-legitimate) are discussed, differences from the similar concept of neutral states are formulated, and the peculiarities of applying the concept to the specific cases of Singapore and Indonesia are demonstrated. The choice of cases is determined by the fact that these states are located in the same geographical area, which creates conditions for what is termed a “controlled” comparison: external conditions are similar, the significance of internal factors is higher. Moreover, taking into account the peculiarities of the comparison, this methodological technique allows not only to reinterpret the historical and international-political experience of the selected countries, but also to identify the possible potential for increasing theoretical knowledge about derivative power and bridge states. The final section presents considerations for the further development of the research program on bridge states.

Research Methodology: Characteristics of “Bridge” States

The concept of “bridge” is mainly considered in contemporary scientific literature from a functional perspective. The term describes a state that occupies an intermediate position between two or more regions, blocks or systems. Examples include a “bridge” between

the Global North and the Global South, between the West and the East, between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and so on. In previous studies, Kazakhstan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Poland, Türkiye, Ukraine and some other states have been identified as “bridges” (Cummings, 2003; Fulton, 2019; Galbraith, 2004; Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002; Ozturk, Yuksel & Ozek, 2011; Durrani, 2022).

A bridge state not only occupies a distinct position between two groups or blocs of states, but also performs a number of other functions. It is generally accepted that states that belong to the number of “bridge” countries:

1) seek to develop and maintain diplomatic relations with different regions, ideological and military alliances,

2) create favorable conditions for trade, investment, and economic cooperation between different groups or blocs of states, taking advantage of their geographic location and resources,

3) support cultural pluralism and build their identity on this basis,

4) possess the ability to play the role of mediators in complex international negotiations.

At the same time, not every state can claim and even more successfully fulfill this role: the realization of transit and communicative functions between two points of attraction must be based on certain conditions, which can be divided into three groups (or aspects): political-geographical, historical-cultural and legitimacy-related.

From a *political-geographical* perspective, a “bridge” state should, firstly, occupy a geographical position that enables it to act as a link between two systems, blocs, poles or other centers of attraction (Lesser, 1992). However, the geographical location of “bridge” states is not necessarily a good one. For example, Indonesia is located on 18 thousand islands in the tropical zone, some distance from the main centers of power. However, it was Indonesia that hosted the Global Climate Movement Forum in November

2023,¹ which was attended by countries representing both the Global North (e.g., the USA, the UK, etc.) and the Global South (e.g., Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Morocco).

Second, “bridge” countries’ policies rely on a balance between groups or blocs of countries. Of course, ensuring complete equidistance (or balancing between major players) is difficult, and this ability is tested in practice in times of military, political or economic conflicts between major powers or their groups.² At the maximum aggravation of the international situation, the mediation function of a bridge country can be paralyzed by the absence of a corresponding request from the warring parties. However, less pronounced conflicts of a predominantly economic and political nature can, on the contrary, actualize the bridging role of a “bridge” country.

Third, equidistance is ensured by a relatively favorable conjuncture. First of all, this relates to security challenges and threats in the region in which the “bridge” country is located (Garnett, 1996), since the need to seek protection from the leading players inevitably disturbs the balance in the foreign policy of the bridge state. In addition, the domestic economic, social and political environment should be favorable, as the strategy of foreign policy balancing cannot be implemented in the conditions of social polarization (Burgess, 2013).

From a *historical and cultural* perspective, the ethno-religious and linguistic pluralism of “bridge” states is important. The identity of such a state should incorporate elements of several cultural communities, which it mediates between (Lesser, 1992). In this regard, societies

¹ Global Forum for Climate Movement Promotes Green Culture, Innovation, and Cooperation // Tempo English. November 19, 2023. URL: <https://en.tempoco.com/read/1798375/global-forum-for-climate-movement-promotes-green-culture-innovation-and-cooperation> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

² Barakat S. The Qatari Spring: Qatar’s Emerging Role in Peacemaking // Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States. 2012. No. 24. P. 94–112. URL: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/35432932.pdf> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

characterized by internal diversity and pluralism can claim a successful bridging function. This requires a high level of political participation of different groups, thereby ensuring that the potential bridge state is not seen as an antagonist for at least one of them. Apparently, this requires a relatively long period of building trust in the role identity of the bridge state (Lesser, 1992).

From a *status-legitimacy* perspective, it is important that the “bridge” is recognized by the two competing sides, systems, poles or blocs. First of all, the internal legitimacy of the status of the “bridge” is given by the national or, at least, elite identity. The ruling elites of a “bridge” state must share a preference for an autonomous rather than externally determined development trajectory (Lesser, 1992). In other words, the “bridge” state should conceptualize its mediation activities as a foreign policy resource.

Of course, the position of a “bridge” requires external legitimacy, but this is rather a consequence of historical, cultural and geographical factors. However, the criterion of external legitimacy brings the concept of a “bridge” state and a neutral state closer together. There are also some other similarities. In particular, neutral states should not, according to international law, take a direct part in a war on someone else’s side. However, there is a nuance: for neutral countries, financial support to one of the parties and some form of participation in peacekeeping operations are not excluded, unlike a “bridge” state (Andrén, 1991). In addition, the status of neutral states is also conditioned by historical reasons such as the disintegration of larger states, defeats in wars, etc. (Agius & Devine, 2011).

At least two differences can be identified between the “bridge” and neutral states (Table 1).

First, the policy of neutral states is passive and rather oriented towards external stimuli, which is reflected in the peculiarities of national identity and in the diplomatic tools used, while the situation is the opposite for “bridge” states.

Second, the status of neutrality is legally fixed, so that external legitimacy compels neutral

states to advocate for the strengthening of international law and its observance by other countries (Neuhold, 1982). In contrast, “bridge” states are more likely to focus on informal interactions, or to supplement legal actions with them. Moreover, the geographical location of a neutral state is not necessarily of a “border” or intermediate nature.

Table 1. Differences between “Bridge” and Neutral States

Criterion	Neutral state	“Bridge” state
Military power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Has no ability and does not seek to defend itself against the most significant threats produced by external forces – May participate in international peacekeeping missions or participate financially in conflicts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cannot defend itself against the most significant external force threats – Favors mediation and negotiation formats, but not the implementation of their solutions
The role in international relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interests are limited to a single region or a group of issues of concern – Reactive and passive foreign policy – Predominantly relies on international law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Variability of topics and geographical scope of foreign policy interests – Active and proactive foreign policy – Does not exclude the possibility of acting informally or in the “gray zone” of law

Source: compiled by I.D. Loshkariov and I.S. Kopytsev.

Consequently, “bridge” states usually pursue an equidistant (non-aligned) foreign policy, using both formal and informal instruments, and rely on a multicultural national (or at least elite) identity.

Foreign Policy of Singapore and Indonesia: Comparative Analysis

The choice of cases for analyzing the specifics of “bridge” states is based on two circumstances.

First, the authors believe that the rigid binding of derivative power to small states limits the heuristic potential of its analysis.

Second, the Indonesia — Singapore pair is located in the same geographical region, which causes similarities in the spectrum of identitarian orientations, the set of competing players and historical circumstances related to decolonization (Table 2).

Table 2. Indonesia and Singapore as “Bridge” States: Similarities and Differences

Singapore	Indonesia
A small island nation at the crossroads of trade routes	A large island nation at the crossroads of trade routes
Differential prioritization of military and economic cooperation with major states	Comparatively equal prioritization of military and economic cooperation with major states
Equidistance since independence (1965)	Equidistance since the 2000s
Pluralistic national identity (including multi-confessionalism)	Pluralistic national identity (except for confessional aspect)
“Bridge” status not contested by major powers	“Bridge” status not contested by major powers

Source: compiled by I.D. Loshkariov and I.S. Kopytsev.

Geographically, both countries are island states. Singapore is located on a small island group near the southern tip of the Malacca peninsula. In turn, Indonesia is located on the islands of the Malay and a number of neighboring archipelagos. Both countries occupy a strategic location at the junction of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. A significant amount of international trade passes through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore. In particular, Singapore is renowned as one of the world’s largest transportation hubs, with its port ranking first in terms of container transshipment.³

Due to its small size and location in the Straits of Malacca, Singapore is in the

³ Singapore Closes 2021 with Record Container Throughput of 37.5 Million TEUs // Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore. January 13, 2022. URL: <https://www.mpa.gov.sg/media-centre/details/singapore-closes-2021-with-record-container-throughput-of-37-5-million-teus> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

neighborhood of only two major centers of power — India and China. In contrast, territorially extended Indonesia is also bordered by U.S. allies, namely Australia, Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. Relatively close to Indonesia is the U.S. territory — Guam Island. Thus, the geographical position of the two states initially determines different combinations of sources of derivative power.

In general, Singapore and Indonesia both meet the criterion of equidistance in their foreign policy. Singapore’s approach has been described as “balancing diplomacy”: while giving a slightly higher priority to security cooperation with India, the country compensates with economic projects with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).⁴ This is evident in the signing of an agreement on joint air force training with India in 2007 and a naval cooperation pact in 2017.⁵ It is no coincidence that, in November 2017, Singapore’s defense minister identified India as a country capable of strengthening the regional security architecture.⁶

With respect to the PRC, such steps are balanced by a number of bilateral agreements. For example, the Military Cooperation Agreement with China was expanded in 2019, and another joint military exercise was held in September 2023. Meanwhile, Singapore is developing rather economic ties with China, as demonstrated by the fact that in 2022 trade turnover with China ranked first in Singapore’s export-import structure, exceeding USD 175 billion. India was not even among Singapore’s top 10 trading

⁴ Fu Y. Singapore’s China — India Balancing Act // *The Diplomat*. January 11, 2018. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/singapores-china-india-balancing-act/> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

⁵ Parameswaran P. Why the New India — Singapore Naval Pact Matters // *The Diplomat*. November 30, 2017. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/why-the-new-india-singapore-naval-pact-matters/> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

⁶ India — Singapore Security Relations in an Evolving Asia // *Brookings*. November 29, 2017. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/india-singapore-security-relations-in-an-evolving-asia/> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

partners.⁷ As a result, neither the high intensity of military cooperation with India nor the close contacts with the Pentagon⁸ contribute to any noticeable friction in China — Singapore relations (Teo & Koga, 2022).

An important aspect of the interaction between Singapore and China has been the attempt to establish a ‘rules-based’ regional order. Singapore’s diplomacy is focused on the need for free navigation and reducing confrontation in the maritime space, and has been consistently promoting dialogue with China on this issue since 2002, using the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) format. In 2017, the two sides reached an agreement on a draft code of conduct in the South China Sea, negotiations around which are still ongoing. As Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2004–2024) noted, “If there are no rules, small countries like Singapore have no chance of survival.”⁹

In turn, Indonesia has been trying to avoid direct involvement in the growing confrontation between the US and the PRC. In particular, the country’s president in 2014–2024, Joko Widodo, has repeatedly emphasized the importance of contributing to global peace, and in the context of the clash of U.S. — China interests has pointed to the inadmissibility of any escalation. Sometimes this requires the condemnation of both great powers at once: Jakarta has expressed concern about China’s expanding presence in the South China Sea and opposes plans within the AUKUS bloc (Australia, UK and U.S.) to deploy nuclear submarines in Australia (Anwar, 2023).

⁷ Total Merchandise Trade at Current Prices, 2019–2023 // Department of Statistics Singapore. URL: <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

⁸ Shраван К. Ш. The Indo-Pacific, What Strategy Vis-À-Vis China? Paris : Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs, 2022. P. 4. URL: https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/observatory-indo-pacific/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IndoPacific-Final_Shravan-Krishnan-Sharma_compressed.pdf (accessed: 20.02.2024).

⁹ Hsien Loong L. National Day Rally 2016 // Singapore Prime Minister’s Office. URL: <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/national-day-rally-2016> (accessed: 20.02.2025).

Conceptually, Indonesia adheres to the principle of “independent and active foreign policy” (*bebas dan aktif*), which implies engaging in relations with major powers and balancing their influence in the region through coalitions with local players. From a practical perspective, this approach sometimes requires limited involvement in the settlement of any problems: in particular, Jakarta limited itself to humanitarian aid deliveries and was not too actively involved in the situation around the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar due to the risks of complicating relations with China. This line continued even after the military overthrew the civilian government in Myanmar, despite the importance of the discourse of democracy and Muslim solidarity for Indonesia’s foreign policy.

Economically, Indonesia has also managed to strike a balance its trade relations: in 2021, trade with China ranked No. 1 in Indonesia’s export-import mix (USD 54.5 billion and USD 60.4 billion, respectively), while the United States, though more than three times behind the Middle Kingdom, was No. 2 in total trade (USD 26.2 billion and USD 9.69 billion, respectively).¹⁰ However, the strong focus on infrastructure development that characterized Joko Widodo’s two presidential terms (2014–2024) has facilitated a rapprochement with Beijing. Chinese companies and the government have become Jakarta’s key partners in implementing logistics projects (Yoshimatsu, 2022). Sanctions and tariff restrictions in Sino-US trade have so far hardly affected Indonesia (Purwono et al., 2022).

The practical implementation of the principle of equidistance has been and remains a challenge for Singapore and Indonesia. Given Singapore’s small size, the issue of maintaining independence is still acute. Nevertheless, the country has not been a part of any regional military alliances, although many former British colonies have participated, for example, in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) (1955–1977). One of the official principles of

¹⁰ Indonesia // OEC Today. URL: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/idn> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

Singapore's foreign policy is "To be friends with all and enemies with none."¹¹ Therefore, the country's authorities maintain their focus on building its own armed forces, but without relying on a single external partner.

Indonesia, in turn, did not immediately adopt the practice of equidistance. After gaining independence, official Jakarta sought to expand its zone of influence, engaging into territorial disputes with Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, and became involved in the conflict in East Timor (Clark, 2011). The incumbent president from 2004–2014, Susilo Bambang Yudoyono, proclaimed the non-use of force as the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy, and his approach, better known as "a thousand friends and no enemies," until recently shaped Jakarta's relations with its neighbors (Andika, 2016; Parameswaran, 2014). However, this approach has now given way to the ideas of Muslim solidarity and the "maritime culture of the Indonesian people." Therefore, the unconstructive stance of the US towards the Palestinian problem and the "nervous" reaction of the PRC to the discussion of the status of the Uighur population form the grounds for tension in their relations with Jakarta. At the same time, Indonesia's "maritime" diplomacy has contributed to resolving major territorial disputes and increasing its role in ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Basin Association (Efimova, 2016; Kuklin, 2019; Anwar, 2023). By adhering to political and military neutrality in the confrontation between China and the U.S., Indonesia is able to play a meaningful role as a mediator (Putri, Pambudi & Adriyanto, 2020, p. 196).

Undoubtedly, Indonesia and Singapore's equidistance policy faces some challenges. For example, there are still tensions between Singapore and Malaysia over a territorial dispute over several islands. In 2008, some of these problems were resolved through the decision of

¹¹ Full Speech: Five Core Principles of Singapore's Foreign Policy // *The Straits Times*. July 17, 2017. URL: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/five-core-principles-of-singapores-foreign-policy> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

the UN International Court of Justice, which partially satisfied the claims of both parties. Singapore's relations with Indonesia have not always been easy. In 2007, Indonesia refused to ratify the Agreement on Military Cooperation and the Extradition Agreement. However, overall, the level of external threats facing both countries is relatively low, which contributes to an active foreign policy and mediatory diplomacy.

In 2020, then Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in an article for *Foreign Affairs* magazine emphasized that the reduction of foreign policy space due to competition between China and the United States would not affect the principle of equidistance in Singapore's diplomacy. He argued that China economically and demographically counterbalances US political influence, and therefore, the task of Southeast Asian countries is to keep regional and global issues as separate as possible, leaving the global agenda to the competing great powers. In other words, the principle of equidistance is possible where there is a way to direct Beijing's and Washington's attention to any related issues or configurations in other regions of the world.¹²

The position of Indonesia and Singapore as "bridges" is legitimized primarily by their pluralistic national identities (Singh, 2008, pp. 318–319). In particular, in Singapore in 2010, approximately 74.1% of the population was ethnically Chinese, another 13.4% were Malay and 9.2% were from the Indian peninsula.¹³ Therefore, Singapore's state identity is a complex combination of individual customs and entire cultural strata belonging to Indian, Chinese

¹² Hsien Loong L. The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation // *Foreign Affairs*. June 4, 2020. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-04/lee-hsien-loong-endangered-asian-century> (accessed: 20.02.2025).

¹³ Census of Population 2010: Advance Census Release // Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Republic of Singapore. August, 2010. URL: https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2010/census_2010_advance_census_release/c2010acr.pdf (accessed: 10.06.2025).

and Malay traditions, but complementing each other and coexisting without conflict within the boundaries of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.¹⁴ Although Chinese citizens have a larger representation at the elite level in Singapore, their special position is primarily due to the very existence of a separate state and the peculiarities of its socio-economic model, rather than support from “mainland” China (Barr, 2016).

Similarly, Indonesia is a multi-ethnic country with more than 1,300 different nationalities and tribes. Its identity is also made up of Indian, Malay and Polynesian layers. Moreover, the Chinese diaspora has become increasingly important in the country, with the number of ethnic Chinese exceeding 3 million. Against this background, some colonial and Western cultural influences persist (Mangundjaya, 2013), manifested in a high degree of social tolerance and a desire for certainty in everyday matters.¹⁵ The empirical research available to the authors also indicates an ethnically and regionally diverse elite in Indonesia, which is nevertheless relatively unified on key political issues and often influenced by a combination of secular and Islamic ideologies (Mitra & Pal, 2022; Warburton et al., 2021).

The factor of a relatively homogeneous national identity in Singapore and Indonesia, with all their party, regional, religious and ethnic differences, turns out to be decisive for the formation of external legitimacy of the status of these states as “bridges” in the Southeast Asian region. The legitimacy of this status does not mean a rejection of the aspirations of major players to induce these countries to cooperate more closely. However, Indonesia’s size probably makes it more difficult for the PRC and

the United States to maintain recognition of its bridge status.

Conclusion

As the international arena continues to evolve, it is not surprising that new functional groups of states are emerging and growing in influence. The case of Indonesia and Singapore clearly demonstrates that the position of a bridge country today is attracting not only small but also relatively large states. Due to the inherent inertia associated with political status, it is likely that for many states the idea of becoming a “bridge” between several groups or blocs of states will retain its appeal and set the logic of behavior in international relations. Furthermore, the probability of such a scenario is further reinforced in the context of continuing tensions between large states (the United States, China, Russia, India).

In this regard, it seems important to clarify the conditions for the emergence and loss of the status and functions of a bridge state, as well as the correlation between internal identity and external structural conditions for these processes. A comparison of the cases of Indonesia and Singapore convincingly shows that the factor of relatively homogeneous national (state) identity plays a key role in the preservation and reproduction of “bridges.” In addition, given the predisposition of bridge states to informal interactions and “gray” legal mechanisms, it may be promising to study smuggling routes and schemes for the delivery of rare goods (including military goods) in connection with certain “bridges.”

Among the most important foreign policy goals of this group of countries, two should probably be emphasized.

First, bridge states aim to avoid direct opposition to the great and regional powers, and therefore tend to seek formats of ad hoc coalitions and to build up relative power potential only in certain niches (mostly non-military ones). In this way, they are able to reduce the concerns of countries that are known to be stronger and that may perceive the build-up

¹⁴ Ken T. J. Singapore: Where Cultures Come Together // National Geographic. URL: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/partner-content-cultures-come-together-in-Singapore> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

¹⁵ Country Comparison Tool // The Culture Factor Group. URL: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=china%2Cindonesia%2Cunited+states> (accessed: 20.02.2024).

of power capabilities by other states as a political challenge or even a threat.

Second, bridge states are more likely to seek to maintain the status quo in the political and geographical division of the world — into military and economic blocs, regions, and groups of countries. At the same time, their proactive foreign policy may lead them to participate in any associations without great and regional powers or to some forms of privileged partnership with existing political and economic blocs (Singapore and Indonesia's membership in ASEAN, Indonesia's membership in BRICS, etc.).

An important theoretical question arises: to what extent do bridge states contribute to the stabilization of relations between the groups or blocs of states being linked? The closest analogy

can be found in chemistry, where bicyclic molecules are held together by separate bonding atoms. Due to their stability in reactions, bicyclic molecules are often used in pharmaceuticals and industry to create more complex compounds. In this regard, it seems appropriate to think about the international political order in a different way, reducing attention to the discourse on regionalization and globalization, and instead looking at the quantity, quality, and connections between groups of countries in international relations that are provided by bridge states. In other words, further research on bridge countries involves emphasizing the connections and types of connectedness, rather than the groups and principles (ideological, military, cultural) of their formation.

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