

Analyzing Singapore's Harsh and Severe Behavior in the Russia–Ukraine Conflict from an Idealist Perspective

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Abstract: *On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military offensive against Ukraine, which quickly attracted widespread attention from the international community. As the Russia-Ukraine conflict continues to escalate, ASEAN countries are becoming sharply divided over their stances toward Russia. Most countries remain neutral or silent, but Singapore is the only ASEAN member to publicly condemn and impose economic sanctions on Russia. This article, drawing on the idealist perspective of international relations theory, analyzes the ideological motivations behind Singapore's actions, arguing that its sanctions and condemnations primarily reflect idealistic principles such as respect for international norms, support for the international rule of law, opposition to the use of force to resolve disputes, advocacy of international institutions to maintain peace, and a focus on public opinion. The article further explores Singapore's strategic considerations within ASEAN and the international community, arguing that its actions reflect both the practical needs of a small state to safeguard its sovereignty and security and its desire to shape its international image, enhance regional leadership, and uphold international order through a moral stance. This research demonstrates the intertwined nature of idealism and realpolitik in Singapore's foreign policy, offering a new perspective on understanding the diplomatic choices of small states during major international crises.*

Keywords: Singapore; ASEAN; Russia-Ukraine Conflict; Idealism; Foreign Policy.

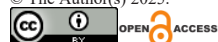
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1. Introduction

Idealism in international relations emphasizes that state behavior should be based on universal values such as moral principles, international law, and human rights, rather than solely on the pursuit of national interests. Idealists believe that the international order should be built on cooperation, justice, and the rule of law, and that states should bear the responsibility to uphold these principles. Singapore's choice to condemn and sanction Russia can be understood as upholding certain core values and principles. These include respect for international norms, support for the international rule of law, and opposition to the use of force to resolve disputes. Since its founding, Singapore has consistently emphasized the rule of law, international cooperation, and the preservation of the living space of small states. Its foreign policy emphasizes neutrality, impartiality, and multilateralism. It actively participates in international organizations such as the United Nations and advocates for the maintenance of international law and order. Throughout international conflicts, Singapore has repeatedly taken a moral stand in support of international law and human rights, demonstrating its idealistic diplomatic philosophy. On March 8, 2023, Singapore's Minister of Home Affairs and Law, K. Shanmugam, reiterated that Russian aggression was "unacceptable," but also emphasized the importance of understanding the role of Western countries in the conflict context, including NATO expansion, and emphasized the complexity of the conflict. At the Ukraine Peace Summit, held in Switzerland on June 15-16, 2024, Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Sim Ann, stated on Sunday (June 16) that Russia should cease hostilities and negotiate in good faith with Ukraine, reaffirming the principles of political independence, territorial integrity, and sovereignty.

2. Singapore is the Only ASEAN Member to Impose Sanctions on Russia

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Against the backdrop of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, ASEAN members have shown significant divergence in their stances toward Russia. Most notably, Singapore has adopted a radically different approach from other members. To better understand this phenomenon, this article first examines the unique characteristics of Singapore's stance toward Russia within the ASEAN framework.

2.1 ASEAN's Neutral Stance in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a "special military operation" against Ukraine. This action quickly sparked mixed reactions in the international community. On February 26, ASEAN foreign ministers jointly issued a joint statement expressing "deep concern" about the "evolving situation and armed hostilities" in Ukraine. Clearly, this statement represents ASEAN's common position. Since it does not condemn any party, it is a completely "neutral" stance, consistent with ASEAN's consistent principles of impartiality and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri publicly stated on February 26 that "ASEAN, as an organization of free states," will not interfere in issues abroad. Just two days after the ASEAN foreign ministers issued the joint statement, Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan suddenly announced that Singapore would join "other like-minded countries" in imposing "appropriate sanctions and restrictions" on Russia. On March 2, the UN General Assembly voted on a draft resolution condemning Russia's military actions in Ukraine. As a result, two completely different positions emerged within ASEAN: one supported the condemnation of Russia and voted in favor, while the other remained neutral by abstaining from voting. Singapore, in particular, explicitly stated its intention to impose sanctions on Russia in the areas of arms control and finance.

2.2 Singapore's Decision to Take the Lead in Imposing Sanctions on Russia

Singapore's sanctions primarily encompass two areas: arms export controls on military items directly used in the war in Ukraine; and financial transaction restrictions, which would prevent banking and financial transactions involving Russia. [1] Specifically, the Singaporean government will impose export controls on items that could be "directly used as weapons to inflict harm or subjugate Ukrainians" and items that could facilitate offensive cyber operations. These include "(a) all items on the Military Goods List, and (b) all items in the 'Electronics', 'Computers', and 'Telecommunications and Information Security' categories on the Dual-Use Goods List of the Strategic Goods (Control) Order 2021." Singapore will impose financial sanctions on designated Russian banks, entities, and activities in Russia, as well as fundraising activities that benefit the Russian government. These sanctions include the Central Bank of Russia and VTB Bank, Russia's second-largest bank. Cryptocurrency trading will also be restricted. Vivian Balakrishnan explained at the time that this move was not intended to be "anti-Russian," but rather to uphold international law. This move marked Singapore as the first ASEAN country to publicly state its position. Singapore's statement immediately sparked surprise and discomfort within ASEAN, as it had not been communicated with other ASEAN countries beforehand, contrary to the principle of consensus. Singapore's move not only impacted ASEAN's overall image but also undermined ASEAN's centrality and influence. [2] While the Singaporean government theoretically has every right to speak on its behalf, this practice has clearly caused discomfort and unease among other parties in ASEAN's crucial efforts to build an integrated community. This also means that Singapore is the first and only Southeast Asian country to impose sanctions on Russia.

3. Analyzing Singapore's Choice from an Idealistic Perspective

Idealism, a prominent school of thought in international relations theory, emphasizes the guiding role of moral principles, legal norms, and universal values in state behavior. Its core assumptions include: The priority of international law and norms: State behavior should be guided by international law, particularly the principle of sovereign equality and the norms for the peaceful settlement of disputes enshrined in the UN Charter. Moral responsibility and the public interest: States should pursue not only their own interests but also consider global public interests, such as peace, security, sustainable development, and the protection of human rights. International cooperation and multilateral mechanisms: Idealism emphasizes resolving conflicts through international organizations, multilateral negotiations, and cooperative mechanisms, rather than relying on force or unilateral action. Singapore's choice to condemn and sanction Russia can be understood as upholding certain core values and principles. These include respect for international norms, support for the international rule of law, and opposition to the use of force to resolve disputes. Since its founding, Singapore has consistently emphasized the rule of law, international cooperation, and the preservation of the living space of small states. Its foreign policy emphasizes neutrality, impartiality, and multilateralism. The country actively participates in international organizations such as the United Nations, advocating for the maintenance of international law and order. In every international conflict,

Singapore has repeatedly taken a moral stand in support of international law and human rights, reflecting its idealistic diplomatic philosophy.

3.1 Respect International Norms

Singapore believes that Russia's deployment of troops to Ukraine violates international norms, including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and other government officials have argued on various occasions that small countries like Singapore must "stand up" to support and uphold the principles of sovereignty and political independence. Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan has explicitly emphasized that Russia's actions against Ukraine set a "completely unacceptable precedent" that is "at stake for Singapore's survival." [3] They said that international norms are based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference, and Singapore believes that Russia's actions seriously violate these norms. Therefore, Singapore's choice is aimed at maintaining and protecting this international order. Singapore's history, fueled by its ties to Malaysia, has also led it to firmly uphold international norms. Now that Russia is disregarding these principles and denying Ukraine's legitimacy, Singapore fears that if Malaysia similarly denies Singapore's legitimacy, its security will be seriously threatened. As Lee Hsien Loong said, "On the Ukraine issue, if we do not maintain our position and make a clear statement, if one day our country faces aggression, no one will speak up for us internationally." [4] Singapore's choice can also be interpreted as support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Idealistically, states should respect and protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations. Singapore's condemnation and sanctions against Russia may be a manifestation of its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, siding with justice and fairness on this issue.

3.2 Supporting the International Rule of Law

Idealists believe that international law can regulate state behavior. Under the purview of international law and international conventions, if an act of aggression occurs, countries around the world can impose sanctions based on these provisions, such as economic sanctions and political isolation. Sanctions and other international pressure can compel the aggressor state to change its policies, thus ensuring world peace. A fundamental rule of international law is that a state may not use the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state. The only circumstance in which a state may use force without Security Council authorization is in self-defense against an armed attack. See Article 51 of the UN Charter: "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security." Singapore's Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security Teo Chee Hean said: "Singapore has always been a staunch supporter of international law and the principles enshrined in the UN Charter...Singapore cannot accept a country attacking another country (or attempting to overthrow its Government through armed intervention) without just cause. It cannot accept a country arguing that another country's independence was the result of "historical mistakes and mad decisions." [5] This is also why Singapore strongly condemns Russia's attack on Ukraine. The Singaporean minister's remarks indicate that he believes Russia's actions constitute a serious violation of international norms, suggesting a belief in the applicability and binding force of international law. The existence and adherence to international law contribute to the maintenance of international order and provide equal and impartial enforcement mechanisms for all nations. Imposing sanctions against Russia's actions can be seen as a way to uphold the international rule of law.

3.3 International Institutions Can Safeguard Peace

Idealists believe that the root cause of war is not irreconcilable conflicts of interest between states, but rather structural flaws in the international system: the lack of effective mechanisms to constrain state behavior, resolve disputes, and promote cooperation. Therefore, building and improving international institutions, making them more normative, coherent, and enforceable, is a key path to achieving lasting peace. First, through the formulation and promotion of international law and international norms, a universally accepted normative framework for state behavior is established. These norms, such as respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in internal affairs, constitute the cornerstone of the international order. Second, international institutions provide peaceful avenues for dialogue, consultation, and dispute resolution between states. Through platforms such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and regional cooperation organizations, countries can communicate, seek consensus, and reach compromise on issues of common concern within a multilateral framework. Furthermore, international institutions play an irreplaceable role in collective security. The core principle of collective security is "unity abroad," meaning that any aggression against one member state will be

considered aggression against all, triggering a collective response. Furthermore, regional security organizations, such as NATO and the African Union (AU), also shoulder the responsibility of maintaining peace and stability within their respective regions. Finally, international institutions indirectly foster peace by promoting global governance and addressing transnational challenges. Issues such as climate change, pandemics, poverty, and terrorism are difficult for any single country to effectively address; they require the concerted efforts of the international community. Idealists believe that as international institutions continue to develop and improve, their role in shaping international behavior, maintaining international order, and promoting global cooperation will grow, ultimately effectively safeguarding world peace and achieving the common progress of human society. Speaking about what we can learn from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Teo Chee Hean suggested creating various frameworks to bridge regional differences and promote cooperative behavior. He highlighted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Singapore's goal to connect both sides of the Pacific; the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a high-quality, inclusive trade bloc that could ultimately bring together Asia-Pacific countries to jointly create prosperity, peace, and stability; and the proposed Indo-Pacific economic framework.

3.4. Oppose the Use of Force to Resolve Disputes

Idealists generally believe that peacefully resolving disputes is a key cornerstone for upholding human rights and promoting human progress. In complex international relations, disagreements and conflicts between nations are almost inevitable. However, a core idealist belief is that even when disagreements exist, they should be resolved peacefully, not through the use of force. Recourse to force not only risks the loss of innocent civilian lives and the destruction of essential infrastructure, but also inflicts lasting scars on both sides and the entire region, permanently undermining mutual trust and cooperation among nations. Therefore, idealists strongly advocate that countries should do their utmost to resolve conflicts and prevent escalation through peaceful means, such as diplomacy, negotiation, mediation, and arbitration. Teo Chee Hean stated, "I hope the war in Ukraine will end and a path to lasting peace will be found." He believes that countries should seek ways to mitigate the precursors of conflict and make every effort to resolve disputes through peaceful means. Singapore's condemnation and sanctions against Russia can be understood as a firm support for the principle of peace. Singapore understands that for a small country with limited resources like its own, a stable and predictable international environment is fundamental to its survival and prosperity. In such an international environment, where international rule of law is universally respected and national sovereignty and territorial integrity are inviolable, small states can be protected from threats posed by major powers. Therefore, Singapore firmly believes that the use of force to resolve disputes is absolutely unacceptable, as it directly challenges the foundations of the international order and could trigger a chain reaction that irreversibly damages the global security landscape. In an international system with clear rules and a well-ordered structure, interactions between states are more transparent and predictable, reducing uncertainty and the risk of potential conflict. As an international city-state, Singapore likely recognizes the importance of long-term peace and stability and seeks to promote regional peace and security through condemnation and sanctions. Upholding international norms and moral principles contributes to creating a stable and predictable international environment, which is crucial for attracting investment, promoting economic development, and safeguarding national security.

3.5. Public Opinion Can Also Ensure World Peace

Idealists in international relations believe that public opinion can ensure world peace. When the public perceives government decisions as immoral, public opinion becomes a powerful force, acting as a check. Singapore's condemnation demonstrates its commitment to and support for international norms and the rule of law. This stance will help enhance Singapore's image and reputation in international public opinion, positioning it as a responsible nation that values international order and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Singapore's condemnation is likely to garner support and resonance from other countries, particularly those with which it enjoys good relations. This will help strengthen ties with allies and partners, potentially opening up opportunities for political, economic, and security cooperation. It will also reinforce Singapore's regional leadership. As a Southeast Asian nation, Singapore's condemnation can be seen as supporting regional stability and balance. This will strengthen Singapore's leadership within ASEAN and other regions, enabling it to more effectively promote regional cooperation and resolve disputes.

4. Conclusions

However, idealistic diplomacy is not without its limitations. First, it faces vulnerability to pressure from major powers. When faced with a major power conflict, small states like Singapore cannot directly influence the outcome of conflicts solely through moral positions; they must also consider major power relationships and economic dependencies. Second, the uncertainty of the international order. Idealism assumes a rules-based international system, but in reality, major powers may act without regard for norms, potentially leading to tension between the moral stance of small states and their practical interests. Therefore, Singapore seeks a balance between idealism and practical interests through the following approaches. First, limited but symbolic sanctions: selective economic and financial sanctions against Russia, which both demonstrate moral support and avoid excessive economic and security pressure. Second, strengthening multilateral cooperation and diplomatic coordination: Through coordination with the United Nations, ASEAN, and Western partners, policies can be strengthened to enhance legitimacy and international support, thereby mitigating the risks of unilateral action. Third, transparent communication and the articulation of principles. Publicly emphasizing that positions are based on international law and principles, rather than targeting specific countries, reduces the risk of escalation while highlighting moral responsibility.

In summary, Singapore's choice to condemn and impose sanctions on Russia can be interpreted from an idealistic perspective as a reflection of its commitment to respecting international norms, supporting the international rule of law, and opposing the use of force to resolve disputes. This stance reflects its commitment to peace, stability, human rights, and the maintenance of international order. It demonstrates its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its commitment to promoting regional peace and security. However, idealistic decisions can also be constrained by realpolitik and interests. Singapore's choice may also be influenced by economic and security considerations regarding Russia, as well as its relations with other countries. Balancing idealism and realism is a common challenge in international politics. Therefore, interpreting and understanding international affairs requires comprehensive consideration of various factors and a comprehensive analytical perspective.

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