

Domestic Politics Analysis of Singapore's Foreign Policy on the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract : In this article, the domestic politic level of analysis is perused as an explanan for Singapore's foreign policy regarding the One Belt and One Road initiative (OBOR) as proposed by China. The developmental plans for OBOR has been explicated by China's President Xi Jinping since 2013, in which the OBOR initiative are comprised of the development of two components, a land course in the form of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and a sea course in the form of Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century (MSR). China seeks to increase the degree of integration across Asia as well as increasing connectivity between Asia and Europe. Singapore, as a South-East Asian country involved in the initiative showed its support for China's endeavor. In line with Ronald Rogowski's work, analysis in regards to the influence a governmental institution hold over foreign policy making is examined based on five aspects: policy bias, credibility of commitment, coherence and stability of policy, mobilization and projection of power, and strategic environment of domestic actors. The influence an institution has over said five aspects are examined through three dimensions of government institutions including franchise, representation, and decision rules. This paper comes to the conclusion that in Singapore's case, foreign policy analysis utilizing domestic politics level of analysis has an inconclusive result.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road or more colloquially known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's development strategy formulated by President Xi Jinping. BRI had been formulated as China's effort in increasing interconnectedness and cooperation among Eurasian states, and in consequence, increase China's role in the region. The BRI itself consists of two main development plans which are set out to integrate trade and economy among the Eurasian states which are in its path. The BRI consists of two components, which is land and sea, where the land component is implemented through the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) which is a path that cuts through lane, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) which is a sea lane and a form of maritime cooperation. Xi Jinping announces the plan for SREB on September 2013 during his visit to Kazakhstan, and the MSR during his visit to Indonesia on October 2012 to attend an APEC meeting. During that visit, President Xi Jinping also proclaimed an initiative to create the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Wang, 2016). President Xi Jinping also stated that Southeast Asia is a region which should be a focus for the BRI development plan, not least because the development of a China-ASEAN maritime cooperation in the MSR can support each party in fulfilling their interests (Xi, 2013).

The blueprint for the Belt and Road Initiative had been officially formed by March 2015, after undergoing intense deliberation between three ministries of the Chinese government: National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce. The guideline which had been published simultaneously by the three ministries elaborates the initiative's main goal which is to create an interconnected network in the longest economic corridor in the world, connecting the Asia Pacific Economic Circle in the east and European Economic Circle in the west, involving about 65 countries and regions around the Silk Road, also known as the Belt and Road lines (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). The blueprint for the BRI which had been created in China was designed to achieve five main

goals, which includes: Tiongkok dirancang untuk mencapai lima tujuan utama, yakni: supporting policy coordination, facilitating connectivity, lifting barriers in the conduct of trade, create financial integration, and forming interpersonal relationships (Wang, 2016).

Singapore is among the Southeast Asian nations involved in the BRI. Generally speaking, Singapore has been a proponent to China's development initiative. Geopolitically, Singapore, with their identity as a port nation is located at a geographical advantage. Historically, Singapore has a history as a port which connects the Asian and European civilizations in the historic Silk Road. Singapore's location also puts the island state at the intersection of two other lanes which constitutes the BRI plan, which are the SREB in the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor which begins in South China and ends in Singapore, as well as the MSR which is a sea lane which stretches all the way from off the coast of China, through Singapore, and into the Mediterranean. In addition, Singapore also acts as the coordinator for China-ASEAN relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2017). Singapore's Foreign Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, stated that Singapore has supported the BRI since its plan's conception and has continued to support it, seeing the demand and desperate need for the construction of an infrastructure that increases the connectivity across Asia and connecting Asia to Europe. Balakrishnan also stated that Singapore has signed an agreement with China to build three platforms as part of the BRI which consists of a platform to increase connectivity cooperation, a platform to boost financial cooperation, as well as a platform to increase cooperation with third parties. (Balakrishnan, 2017).

In this paper, the factors which motivates the formulation of Singapore's foreign policy in supporting the realization of the BRI will be analyzed. Specifically, I will focus more on the motivating factors from Singapore's domestic politics.

2 DOMESTIC POLITICS AS AN EXPLANAN FOR FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

In conducting analysis on Singapore's foreign policy in regards to the BRI, a researcher is faced with many options, among which is the domestic politics level of analysis. Robert Putnam (1988) wrote about how the domestic and foreign aspects of a nation's policy can be seen as analogous to a two-level game and are

mutually entangled to one another in that sense. A shift or movement in one "board" of the game influences conditions in the other "board". Through this analogy, Putnam illustrates how domestic politics in a state relates and can become entangled in the foreign policy the state conducts. What occurs in foreign politics always impacts domestic politics, and processes in domestic politics always impacts foreign policy. The correlation between domestic politics and foreign policy renders analysis which are based solely on the domestic or on the international insufficient to explain and shed light on foreign policy comprehensively (Putnam, 1988). The argument in this frame of thinking has experienced a vast development in the discourse of International Relations and along with the development of the discourse, the domestic politics level of analysis has gained traction in academic circles in analyzing foreign policy.

Domestic political institutions are inherently situated in an international context, which means that activities and processes occurring in the domestic level has international consequences. This is due to the structure of the governmental institutions which consists of contingency networks structurally influential in a direct and non-direct manner to the foreign policy of a nation. Therefore, it is crucial to see a governmental institution not only as a structure but as a determining factor which influences the formation of the process (Hudson, 2014). Governmental institutions determine how power is distributed in domestic politics.

By creating a difference in power and voice relative between domestic actors, domestic governmental institutions may construct the preferences of various domestic actors in a structural manner. In addition, governmental institutions may be a tool used to form and implement policy in regards to certain issues. Domestic political institutions bounds the enactment of actors' preferences, and thus it tends to memunculkan oppositional groups. According to Valerie Hudson (2014), in regards of foreign policies, it is said that foreign policies are greatly influenced by domestic politics, and that to a certain extent is itself a product of the efforts of domestic political actors to achieve their interest in the face of opposition. Domestic actors peruse simple strategies in order to do so, among which are ignorance, direct tactics, indirect tactics, and compromising.

Ronald Rogowski (1999) proposed a method to determine to what extent a domestic political institution influences foreign policy based on three independent variables: *franchise* – to what extent

groups which preferences are taken into account has an influence on policy and which groups' preferences are taken into account, *representation* – actors which acts as representation for the franchise and how those representatives are selected, and *decision rules* – when and how representatives can encourage a commitment from a governmental body on an action. Based on those three variables, the influence domestic policy and politics has on foreign policy and politics may be analyzed empirically. Rogowski categorizes five ways in which foreign policy may be influenced, which are: policy bias, credibility of commitments, coherence and stability of policy, mobilization and projection of power, and strategic environment. The main objective of all foreign policy strategies is to render domestic policies compatible to international conditions (Putnam, 1988).

The domestic politics level of analysis is not an approach to explaining foreign policies that is without its flaws. Some International Relations scholars has stated that using the domestic politics level of analysis in explaining foreign policy is reductive in nature, by way of equating foreign policy to the domestic politics of foreign nations or to no more than merely the product of a nation's domestic politics (Fearon, 1998). It must also be acknowledged that research and theorizing in regards of this level of analysis is still relatively new (Rogowski, 1999). There exists much debate regarding the relevance of this level of analysis in explaining foreign policy in relation to domestic politics. Additionally, I am of the opinion that the domestic political level of analysis in its usage may serve to confuse researchers, especially when the cases being analyzed aren't sufficiently focused, which may lead the analysis only in the realm of domestic politics and its complexities without giving an explanation or rationalization in regards to how it relates to foreign policy, and how both influences each other. However, the domestic politics level of analysis may form a more comprehensive explanation of foreign policy. By starting from domestic politics as a relatively more self-contained unit of analysis in order to explain the phenomenon of international politics and foreign policy which are higher in complexity, researchers may formulate an explanation which are more comprehensive and may show how domestic politics causally relate to foreign policy actors and formulation processes.

3 SINGAPORE DOMESTIC POLITICS

Singapore is a parliamentary republic with a representative democratic system of government. The Executive branch of the Singaporean government is carried on functionally by the Singapore Cabinet under the leadership of the Prime Minister and, to a certain extent, of the President. The Singaporean Parliament conducts the Legislative function, with parliament members who are elected by the people. Officially, Singapore has a multi-party system, but practically the Singaporean Parliament has been dominated by the People's Action Party since Lee Kuan Yew was elected as the first Singaporean Prime Minister in 1959, and since then the party's position as the ruling party in the government has been unchallenged. Up until the general elections in 2015, the People's Action Party has won 83 out of 89 seats in parliament. The People's Action Party has more or less been in the dominant position in Singapore's domestic politics, without any challenging or opposition party having enough power to shift the *status quo*. The greatest opposition to the People's Action Party is present in the Singapore Labour Party which up until 2017 has placed in 9 out of 101 seats in the parliament. With this condition, Singapore may be considered as an undemocratic country, since *de facto* it is a country with one singularly dominating political party (Reyes, 2015).

Furthermore, in line with the writings of Ronald Rogowski (1999), in this paper the influence of governmental institutions shall be analyzed in five aspects: policy bias, credibility of commitments, coherence and stability of policy, mobilization and projection of power, and strategic environment of domestic actors. The influence that governmental institutions has on those five aspects will be analyzed from the three dimensions of governmental institutions which consists of franchise, representation, and decision rule.

4 POLICY BIAS

Rogowski (1999) expounded that the characteristics of governmental institutions holds influence over policy and causes certain biases to form. Governmental institutions has an influence on the formation of national interest and in determining the goal which foreign policy seeks to achieve. This can be seen in Singapore's domestic politics which is effectively dominated by the People's Action Party,

which places the franchise of domestic policy as well as of foreign policy of Singapore on the groups which are part of the People's Action Party. In other words, the interests of the People's Action Party in policymaking in Singapore are privileged in absence of any opposition which are able to challenge the domination of the People's Action Party's interests. The People's Action Party also has an economic ideology which are supportive of the formulation of policies pertaining to free markets. The People's Action Party's ideology which supports economic liberalization is consistent with Singapore's support of the BRI, which provides new economic opportunities and a larger market integration for Singapore.

The decision rules in place in governmental institutions are prone to cause biases to form, especially when institutions are consisted of a vast array of bodies with various points in the decision-making process in which veto may be exacted. Biases in policymaking can emerge in such conditions and policies created will tend to conform to the *status quo* (Rogowski, 1999). In Singapore's system of government, policy is made by Singapore's Cabinet of Ministers collectively. Members of the Cabinet and the Prime Minister of Singapore is appointed by the President, in which the President appoints the Prime Minister from the parliament members which are deemed trustworthy and may be trusted by the majority of parliament members (Konstitusi Republik Singapura, art. 25). Effectively, the Prime Minister of Singapore is usually the leader of the majority party in parliament. Since the People's Action Party has been the majority party in Singapore's parliament since 1959, the composition of the Singaporean Cabinet of Ministers has also been dominated by members of the People's Action Party. In 2017, when Singapore's foreign policy in regards to the BRI is formed, the composition of the Cabinet of Ministers entirely consisted of members of the People's Action Party (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2017). The decision rule which places the authority to form policy on the Prime Minister and Cabinet of Ministers influences the foreign policy of Singapore to conform to the *status quo*, which entails an accordance to the interests of the People's Action Party.

5 CREDIBILITY OF COMMITMENTS

As a part of international relations, nations will inevitably enter into commitments on the international level, such as in pacts, agreements, or in development initiatives such as the BRI proposed by China to Singapore and to other Asian nations. Rogowski (1999) in his article stated that the credibility of the commitment made by nations as part of their foreign policy is a product of their domestic politics. Governmental institutions functions as guarantors that binds actors to their commitment – this assumption is also applicable in domestic politics, which consequentially means that said assumption are also extendable to foreign policy. Credibility of commitment are affected by various aspects of the institution, among which is the institution's franchise. A view that exists among scholars regards credibility of commitment and franchise as being directly proportional, with the wider the franchise is the greater the credibility becomes. However, there are also those who argue that credibility is obtained from a strong bureaucracy, insulated from politicization. In the case of Singapore, with the constellation of their domestic politics practically dominated by one party, these assumptions are regarded as inapplicable. Based on the first assumption, Singapore's credibility are considered to be high, seeing as the People's Action Party's electability is also very high, indicating a big franchise. But the high rate of electability stems from the fact that the People's Action Party dominates the political system in Singapore, and therefore cannot be considered representative of the Singaporean people's franchise. On the other hand, the second assumption applies only if in a nation's domestic politics there exists a contestation from opposing parties, since the existence of an opposition in the policymaking process could cause inconsistencies in the government's commitments to their policy. Bureaucracy insulated from politicization is considered more credible because there is no challenge in policymaking between opposing parties with differing and clashing interests. The absence of an opposition in Singapore's political system narrows policy option and limits it only to what the People's Action Party proposes.

In line with the principles of franchise, representation can also affect the credibility of commitment which the government comes into. Franchise and representation as an instrument to deliver and obtain the franchise's interests are closely related. Representatives are considered to have a credible commitment when they are successful in

insulating judgment from public opinion as well as pressure to pursue goals which are more short-term in nature (Rogowski, 1999). This cannot be a point of analysis in Singapore's case, since there is no opposition that the dominant party has to face. The majority of the representative seats in Singapore's parliament are occupied by the members of the People's Action Party, the absence of an opposition means that there is no contestation for that position, rendering the representative positions in the following election cycle more or less guaranteed. What this means for short-term goals and pressure that comes from public opinion is that they have less of an influence on representatives since there is not really a pressure for them to support policies that are more populist in nature in order to secure their positions for the next elections. The credibility of representatives are more or less guaranteed by the party's domination.

Still in relation with franchise and representation, decision rules also affect the credibility of commitments. The system in place in an institution can directly and non-directly exert influence on credibility, for example, generally delegates who have specialized roles and tenure on their position has a higher credibility (Rogowski, 1999). Systems of veto and clarity when it comes to the authority of each part of the government can also affect credibility.

6 COHERENCE AND STABILITY OF POLICY

Commitment to foreign policy is a vital part to the government of a country, however, commitment on its own is not sufficient if a state behaves in an erratic and unpredictable manner in the formulation of their foreign policy. Another important factor to the foreign policy of a nation is consistency, for without consistency in their foreign policy a nation may be regarded as incoherent and unstable (Rogowski, 1999). Domestic politics in this sense affects the coherence and stability of foreign policy, in which the difference in the formulation of foreign policy is inversely proportional to how far domestic institutions can unite the preferences of a group or individual. From the franchise dimension, when there occurs an internal rift in many an independent issue, the foreign policy formed will also be unstable. On the contrary, policies formed mono-dimensionally in accordance to general agreement tends to be more coherent and stable in nature (Rogowski, 1999). In the case of Singapore, it is evident that, at least in their

bilateral relation with China, Singapore is coherent and consistent with their foreign policy. Formally Singapore affirms their good relationship with China and has been consistently fostering that relationship since the 1990s, albeit along with the passage of time and with the dynamics of international relations both parties have had their disputes time and time again. Singapore's support of the BRI and of China's position in Southeast Asia has generally reflected this consistency. This coherence in policy may be attributed to the dominance of the People's Action Party in the government which allows for policies to be more consistently upheld.

Representation-wise, a higher coherence and stability can be manifested in the form of a more simplified form of government with a lesser number of governing body, or with a clearer hierarchy in the structure of government which consists of a vast array of bodies (Rogowski, 1999). Moreover, in regards of decision rules, coherence and stability may be achieved when authority is concentrated in one entity, whosoever holds the authority has a great power for agenda-setting (Rogowski, 1999). Generally speaking, a more streamlined distribution of power in the domestic level could mean a higher coherence and stability in foreign policy-making. The smaller the number of actors involved in policymaking, the more coherent their policies that they formulate.

7 MOBILIZATION AND PROJECTION OF POWER

Domestic politics influences a nation's ability to mobilize their resources and to project their power abroad. This ability depends on the regime of government in place, with a legitimized government being better at extracting resources as opposed to an authoritarian one (Rogowski, 1999). Still in line with this, franchise has a big part in determining foreign policy, including as one of the resources being mobilized. A democratic and legitimate government, in other words holding big franchise from the people of the nation, may mobilize with higher effectivity, one of the reasons being that there is a strong support from the people themselves. The government regime in Singapore is a regime which conventionally may be categorized as legitimate, since it was elected democratically through a general election. The big support they receive from the people enables Singapore to formulate policies which allows them to mobilize their resources in order to support China in

building the infrastructure for the BRI. In relation to public support, a more intense relation and interaction between the franchise and their representative has also been attributed by Rogowski (1999) as an enabling factor for the government to mobilize their resources and to project their power.

On the other hand, a more complex decision rule with veto systems causes friction and disagreement which hinders mobilization, while a larger capacity for agenda setting may aid mobilization and projection of power (Rogowski, 1999). In this case, the Singaporean government are considered to have a larger capacity for agenda-setting since the composition of the members of their government tend to be more homogenous with a majority coming from the same party. The agreement from a majority of the decisionmakers are much easier to achieve, which makes mobilization that much easier to do.

8 STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT OF DOMESTIC ACTORS

Strategy formulated by policymakers in an institutional setting differ from strategies formed in other institutional settings. This is due to the fact that the regimes in each setting of institution also differ from one another. To achieve the goal of foreign policy, foreign policy makers need to adjust their strategy with their respective domestic political institution, as a mechanism in which policy may be formed and implemented. In this case, institution may influence foreign policy by limiting the options for strategy (Rogowski, 1999). The franchise can have an influence over how domestic actors formulate strategy and the ways in which the goals of said strategy can be achieved. Variation among the franchise can affect an actor's ability in forming their strategy. However, this does not affect the decision-making process in Singapore, because the People's Action Party has been dominating the government for over 50 years. Not only that the decisionmakers need not worry about winning the support of the people, the people's preferences are also formed on the basis of the *status quo*, in which the People's Action Party has been a sole dominating actor and more or less provides the people's options when it comes to policy.

From the representation dimension, power concentrated in one branch of the government limits the strategy options to intimidation and domination from that branch of government, whereas a more dispersed distribution of power creates an opportunity

for more complex strategies and therefore allows for a variation of ways of influencing (Rogowski, 1999). The first condition applies to the domestic politics of Singapore, where the domination of the People's Action Party in the government is the main contributing factor to the effectiveness of government institutions in implementing policy.

9 CONCLUSION

I conclude that the domestic politics level of analysis is not sufficiently effective in explaining Singapore's foreign policy when it comes to the BRI and Singapore's involvement in the initiative, and in the end the results of the analysis is inconclusive. This is due to the fact that indicators used can only explain the aspects of Singapore's foreign policy partially. The indicators employed to determine the influence of domestic politics on foreign policy is analyzed through five aspects which include policy bias, credibility of commitments, coherence and stability of policy, mobilization and projection of power, and strategic environment of domestic actors. From the policy bias aspect, it can be confirmed that domestic politics can explain foreign policy by causing biases to form in Singapore's foreign policy in supporting the BRI, among which are the biases favoring the People's Action Party's interest as the dominant party in the Singapore government. From the commitment credibility aspect, the domestic politics of Singapore cannot be the basis of analysis for their foreign policy given the conditions which places the domestic politics as an explanans is not fulfilled. From the coherence and stability of policy aspect, domestic politics cannot fully explain Singapore's foreign policy, because the coherence of Singapore's foreign policy is partially attributed to the domination of the People's Action Party in the government. From the mobilization and projection of power aspect, the domestic politics in Singapore which is democratic can be said to contribute to their foreign policy. From the strategic environment of domestic actors, domestic politics is not completely sufficient in explaining foreign policy. In the case of Singapore, the domestic politics level of analysis is not relevant enough as an explanans for foreign policy given that Singapore's domestic politics is dominated by one party. The absence of an opposition renders the domestic politics ineffective in explaining foreign policy.

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