

Understanding Public Diplomacy Strategies of Small States: A Case Study of SingaporeLakshmi Priya Vijayan¹**Abstract**

In an international system that is highly influenced by the actions of major powers, small states find their niche by employing methods through which they can highlight their areas of expertise and build a positive image amongst the foreign public. Public diplomacy increases the visibility of these small states on the international platform and helps in attracting foreign investments and support. Small states engage with the public of other States using various features such as culture, food, diversity, tourism, health, etc. Despite the smaller geographical size and lack of natural resources, a small state like Singapore has a good standing in international affairs because of its ability to reach a wider foreign public and build the image of an economically sound and business-friendly country. Even without a natural tourist spot of attraction, the country has been successful in establishing itself as a major tourist spot through manmade tourist sites, and extravagant infrastructure. Singapore uses ethnic diversity, city diplomacy, sustainable development models, innovation, efficient biomedical research, etc as strategies through which it can communicate with and influence the foreign public. The paper aims to explore how small states practice public diplomacy and the strategies employed, analyse the public diplomacy strategies of Singapore, and assess the impact of these strategies on Singapore's image-building.

Keywords: Public diplomacy, public diplomacy strategies, small states, Singapore, city diplomacy, health diplomacy, image building of states.

¹ Lakshmi Priya Vijayan holds a Master's degree in Geopolitics and International Relations from the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, Karnataka. Her research interests are geopolitics of Southeast Asia, transnational organised crimes and CBW.

Introduction

In an international system that is highly influenced by the actions of major powers, small states find their niche by employing methods through which they can highlight their areas of expertise and build a positive image amongst the foreign public. Public diplomacy increases the visibility of these small states on the international platform and helps in attracting foreign investments and support. Small states engage with the public of other States using various features such as culture, food, diversity, tourism, health, etc. Despite the smaller geographical size and lack of natural resources, a small state like Singapore has a good standing in international affairs because of its ability to reach a wider foreign public and build the image of an economically sound and business-friendly country. Even without a natural tourist spot of attraction, the country has been successful in establishing itself as a major tourist spot through manmade tourist sites, and extravagant infrastructure. Singapore uses ethnic diversity, city diplomacy, sustainable development models, innovation, efficient biomedical research, etc as strategies through which it can communicate with and influence the foreign public. The paper aims to explore how small states practise public diplomacy and the strategies employed, analyse the public diplomacy strategies of Singapore, and assess the impact of these strategies on Singapore's image-building.

Research Methodology

The methodology used for the study is a deductive and analytical approach to understand the various public diplomacy strategies adopted by Singapore. The study looks at the existing literature to locate the arguments and draw inferences. This research is descriptive and uses a qualitative approach to examine the various arguments. Primary data is gathered from the official documents of Singapore on its various policies and events pertaining to their outreach. The secondary data for the study will be collected from various sources such as books, journals, videos, and news reports. The study uses mapping as well as threat assessment. The method of triangulation is used to rule out any kind of biases that are supposed to appear along the course of the study.

Problem Statement

In a world order where great powers have indefinite access to a global audience and propagate their values and culture for larger consumption, the platform for relatively smaller states are less. To stay relevant and influential, thereby promoting their economy, smaller states focus on enhancing their niche interests, making their country the destination for the particular niche

area. While there is expansive literature on the public diplomacy strategies adopted by great powers, studies on small states have been sparse. Singapore is a prime example of a successful public diplomacy which has resulted in shaping an identity that blurs out its natural constraints. Country's public diplomacy has generated revenues that have elevated its position in the region. The study addresses the various public diplomacy strategies of small states, strategies employed by Singapore and the impact of these strategies on the image building of Singapore.

Public Diplomacy Strategies of Small States

Public diplomacy strategies are methods or tools through which state's powers and capabilities are communicated to a foreign public through the State, non-state actors, powerful individuals, or people-to-people interaction (Özkan, 2015). These strategies include the use of cultural factors, popular culture, historical identities, architecture, technology, innovation, gastrodiplomacy, music diplomacy, health, and sometimes political positions such as neutrality. The lack of visibility of small States in international politics and systems demands concrete public diplomacy strategies, especially when there is a growing power disparity between states (Chaban et al, 2019). In order to have a representation of these States in the international system, there is a need for these States to engage with State and non-State actors that can help create and project the country's narratives to the foreign public (Chaban et al., 2019). Many small States such as New Zealand, Singapore, Norway, Sweden and more have been able to create an image that is unique to them. These images have been created through various methods and constant messaging of this identity to the outside world.

All the major powers have a permanent pool of foreign audiences who are aware of the functioning and capabilities of these states, whereas the effort of small states is to create that particular set of audiences who have an image of the country in order to have their policies heard and engaged on an international platform (Lakatos, 2017). In order to create that image, there is a need for more information on these states in the public domain, which is only possible through the continuous tailoring of messages on their identity and niche areas. More innovative and creative ways are adopted by the state to attract investments, as well as support from other major powers who have a standing in the system (Lakatos, 2017). Small states use strategies that are more persuasive, low-cost, and have better outcomes. These states also pay special attention to participation in multilateral cooperation and engagements. The branding of small states can be done by focusing on a particular theme in order to maximise the utilisation of resources (Mekaj, 2020), and at times, the foreign policy of the State becomes synonymous with its public diplomacy efforts. While Kosovo is focused on its sports diplomacy, Norway

is associated with peacemaking and negotiations, building an identity as a neutral, peace-loving nation.

Today, more small States are focusing on using digital diplomacy as a major element to enhance their public outreach. Social media plays a significant role in the imaging and narrative building of the country. New Zealand has a special division in its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) that solely focuses on digital media content creation, analysis, and digital strategies which has contributed to its status as the easiest country to do business in (Pantoja, 2021). With innovation as the key element (Giridhardas, 2018), small states (Singapore Tourism Board, 2024) are now focusing on the possibilities of Industry 4.0 (Peterkova, 2020). Singapore has been exemplary in finding a voice in the international system through its public diplomacy efforts.

Public Diplomacy Strategies of Singapore

Singapore is known as ‘a little red dot’, with a diverse population consisting of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian (Giridhardas, 2018). Despite being a geographically smaller state with little to no natural resources, what makes Singapore stand out and able to partner with various states, the big powers as well as the smaller states is the ability of the state to attract the foreign public to visit and invest in Singapore through various (Rana, 2006). Singapore has for a long time used its plural society, good business practises, infrastructure, health infrastructure, innovation, city diplomacy, and its growing focus on climate change and sustainable development to engage with foreign nationals and build a positive image that lasts. Singapore is a highly advanced and economically stronger country, with millions of people across the world visiting the city-state, a state without any natural attractions.

Foundations of Singapore’s Public Diplomacy

In a crude sense, public diplomacy in Singapore can be traced back to the period of colonisation, when the overseas business communities that resided in Singapore went back to their home countries and propagated the ideals of this small island that had not yet attained its statehood but was realising its idea of a nation (Chong, 2021). The history of Singapore as a major hub of trade and economy during British rule has influenced the shaping of the Singaporean identity. A form of proto-public diplomacy operated in Singapore by the mercantile civil society, which cut across borders. The native population of Singapore is of Malayan and Indonesian origin yet has a distinct identity despite having shared origins due to cultural exchanges.

Singapore's public diplomacy efforts started soon after its independence in 1965. Singapore's public diplomacy is interchangeably used with its foreign policy because a large part of Singapore's foreign policy lies in establishing the country's voice, which was feeble in the early part of its history (Chong, 2021). The initial phase of Singapore's establishment and image was composed of a negative image due to the ethnic and regional rifts that were taking shape in the Southeast Asian region. In order to be seen and heard on the international platform that is largely shaped by geographically vast countries and large economies, it started projecting its potential and strength. The 1965 United Nations address by S. Rajaratnam, the first foreign minister of Singapore and a key player in the formulation of Singapore's foreign policy, advocated the identity and image of Singapore as a trading community (Rajaratnam, 1965) as an initial step towards the formation of its narrative of the Singapore State as a trade focused country. Public diplomacy remains key to locating Singapore on international platforms. Singapore transitioned from a developing country to one of the most advanced countries that attract investments by turning its weaknesses into its strengths. From a very early stage of its foundation as a state, it realised the importance of opening up to other countries and highlighted multiracial, multiethnic identity, and multilateral engagements. The founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was in liaison with this idea of people-to-people engagements, and public diplomacy activities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs alone acts as the primary agency of public diplomacy without alternative branches to oversee foreign affairs considering the limited number of embassies and missions that Singapore has (Mirpuri, 2023).

Singapore: The Business Hub

As a small state, Singapore has been able to cement its position as an economic power that attracts investments from the world's largest economies, a feature that highlights the success of Singapore's public diplomacy strategies and efforts. Today, Singapore is the second-highest country with a higher GDP per capita, indicating the financial stability Singapore has. Rising above the constraints posed by nature, Singapore has been able to be a pro-business economy with huge foreign investments (MPA, 2024). All the technological giants of the world have regional headquarters in Singapore, projecting the appealing effect of the country on foreign companies and multinational firms. As a country that is highly focused on technological innovation, which goes hand in hand with novel ideas, businesses show a keen interest in investing in Singapore. With its open economy and low tax rates, the country attracts multinational companies to operate, thus establishing its title as the best in the world in ease of

doing business (Donnelly, 2022). The Economic Development Board (EDB) serves as a government agency in promoting Singapore's businesses globally to enhance its global standing (EDB, 2022). They act as 'economic diplomats' and in the 'marketing' of Singapore as a country of innovation and a fast-moving nation with cultural values. Singapore's workforce is considered highly skilled, with high expertise in technology and communication, and with world-class infrastructure (Donnelly, 2022), which makes Singapore an Asian business hub.

Culture and Diversity

One of the features that form the foundation of Singapore's identity is its multiracial and multicultural identity. Singapore incorporates this cultural diversity into communicating with the foreign public. Lately, the use of its culinary varieties to create a brand for a culinary destination in Southeast Asia is becoming central to the State's public diplomacy strategies. Hawker culture in the state reflects the principles that the state is trying to project. Hawker culture is a community dining facility where the diverse Singaporean population comes together to dine and play games, building a strong community (UNESCO ICH, 2020). This Hawker culture has existed since the period of colonisation and has helped build the national identity of the State. In the modern context, Hawker centres are used to build people-to-people interactions using cultural factors (Hawker Culture, 2024). The Hawker culture, which is essentially part of Singaporean culture, is now present in Malaysia and Hong Kong. The popularity of Singapore noodles and street food helped in the building of a culinary-specific initiative. The Singapore Encore, organised by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), partnered with the government consulate and embassies outside of Singapore to help boost the country's image. Apart from Singaporean cuisine, its culture and art are also part of the attractions (BARRENA, 2009).

The immense popularity of the Netflix series 'Crazy Rich Asians' became a tool for its soft power projection. Even though there were backlashes from the domestic sphere on the fabrication of Singaporean life in the movie (Appiah, 2018), it was well-received all over the world and celebrated the luxurious sites of the Singapore State. The Singapore tourism board used the popularity of the film to launch 'Crazy Rich Singapore Week' in Los Angeles (Chua, 2018) and its marketing strategy of recreating some moments from the film.

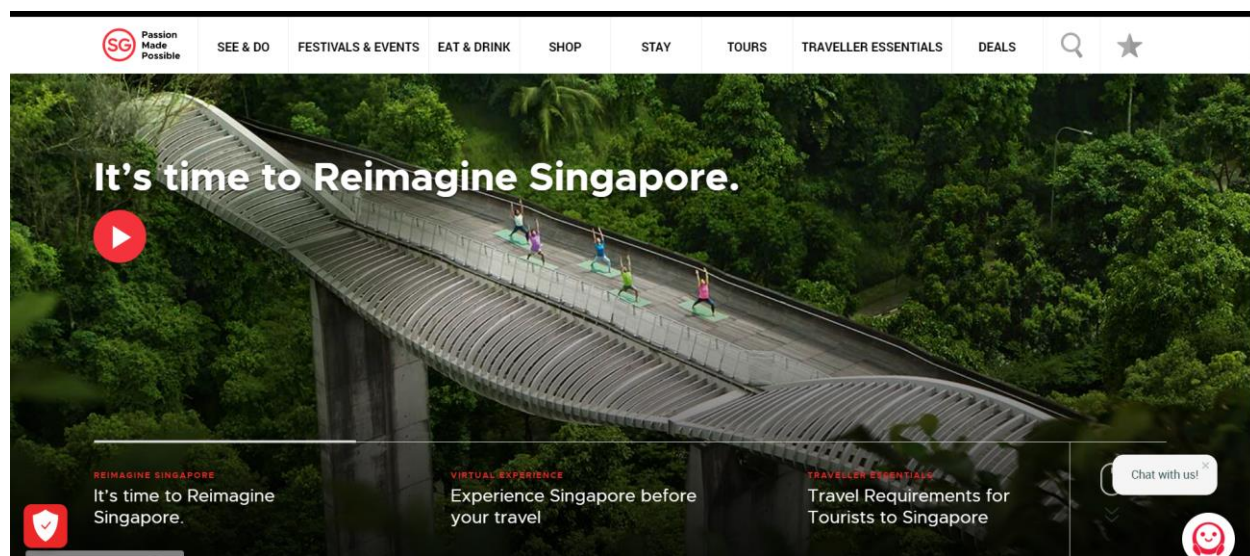
Sustainable Development and Tourism

As Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are gaining momentum on a global scale, countries are discussing ways to become more environmentally resilient and sustainable. Singapore has been successful in selling its story of sustainable development (MFA, 2018). The country has a physical geography that does not house natural energy or water resources. The topography also does not support adequate food production. To resolve the issues, Singapore follows methods, and strategies that are sustainable, and add value to the branding of the nation. For the most part, Singapore's industrial innovations are built on the constraints that the country has. Even though Singapore is an island state surrounded by water, the country is highly water-stressed. As a solution to this longstanding issue, 'NEWater' was established. NEWater uses sewage water to recycle into high-quality water that is used for multiple purposes, which also include drinking water (Singapore's National Water Agency, 2022). One of the major water supply pipelines uses NEWater for this drinking water facility and is also proven to be cleaner than the drinking water that comes from other sources (Singapore's National Water Agency, 2022). This facility is also open for tourism, which is a projection of the nation's scientific innovation and capabilities (UN, 2024). When the major first-world countries were planning to transform their densely populated and polluted cities into green and sustainable ones, Singapore had already envisioned and implemented this truly sustainable development-fusion city model in its early stages of development. Singapore's Garden City is this intertwining of nature and urban setup (Government of Singapore, 2024). For the same reason, Singapore has been successful in projecting itself as a model for sustainable development. The country hosts the Singapore International Water Week and the CleanEnviro Summit.

Singapore Tourism Board (STB) is the government agency that is responsible for promoting the tourism activities of the state. The tourism sector is a vital component of economic development as well as people-to-people interaction. The symbol of Singapore's imagination, Merlion Park, Marina Bay Sands, Gillman Barracks, Chinatown, etc., are some of the major attractions (Singapore Tourism). There have been different tourism campaigns throughout the years strategized by STB. In the initial years of Singapore, it was branded as 'the Lion City' paying homage to its historical roots as Singapura, its foundational identity, and the symbol of the merlion, reinforcing this image later. The branding of 'Garden City' was developed with the aim of having a sustainable environment with all the traits of a highly advanced urban city, this reflected Singapore's vision of growing with nature or developing with consideration for the environment, a far-fetched dream for a developing country even now. Today, Singapore

can be considered the champion of this balance of sustainability and modernisation, a feat that is difficult to replicate. During the 1970s, the tagline 'Instant Asia' reflected the multicultural identity of Singapore, which had all Asian identities coexisting together, and as a single destination to experience the whole of Asia (Chang, 1997). The 1990s were about the economic miracle and the idea of 'New Asia' which was on par with the Western countries. The 'Uniquely Singapore' campaign launched in 2004 incorporated new sides of Singapore (HistorySG, 2004). The current tagline of Singapore tourism is 'Passion Made Possible' (Singapore Tourism, n.d.). It can be observed that there is a shift in Singapore's projection in its tourism sector as the emphasis has been given to reimagining Singapore.

Figure 1. Introductory Picture of Singapore Tourism



(Source: <https://www.visitsingapore.com/en/>)

City Diplomacy

City diplomacy can be defined as "the municipal governments' practise of cross-border interaction with their peers from all over the world, both with each other and with actors such as international organisations, development banks, NGOs, and even foreign nations" (Grandi, 2022). In the age of globalisation, with the increasing number of people moving in and out of cities from different countries, cities can help propagate the ideas of the nation to the foreign public in the city. And these cities have a branding of their own, which in turn helps the state elevate its image in the international sphere. For example, New York being termed the city of dreams', and most K-pop songs referring to Tokyo as the best city, enhance the image of the city and the state. Similarly, Singapore is known for its extravagant infrastructure, swift connectivity, and transportation, with major economic activities happening in the city where

people from across the world travel. Considering Singapore's status as a business-friendly nation with people and investments flowing continuously, city administration can play a significant role in engaging with the city administrations of other States and establishing good diplomatic relations (Martinez & Bunnell, 2024). Singapore has developed an ecosystem that suits international trade and has the status of a global city.

Singapore City has hosted significant global-level conferences that have positively contributed to the city's relations with other States. Going by the seven lessons by Nicholas J Cull in his article, the sixth lesson emphasises that 'Public diplomacy is not always about you' (Cull, 2010), emphasising the importance of States giving space for other countries to share their experiences, hence, by hosting various global level conferences and summits, the State is trying to perform its public diplomacy. The Trump-Kim Singapore Summit that was held in 2018 also garnered a lot of attention (Kurlantzick, 2018). The characteristic feature of Singapore-city is its coordination with sustainability and livability, the theme of the World Cities Summit. In order to enhance the global city network, Singapore organises a biannual World Cities Summit where mayors of different cities across the globe visit Singapore city, and interact with businesses and knowledge circles (WCS, 2021). The Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize is an initiative by Singapore in collaboration with the World Cities Summit to award cities that have made remarkable achievements (WCS, 2021). It also partners with international organisations and think-tanks to create an international network where Singapore is the champion.

Health Diplomacy and Biomedical Industry

Singapore has a public diplomacy model in which it adapts to the needs of the hour, and that has a high potential to be tomorrow's technology. Health is one such area that Singapore is focusing on. Southeast Asia has a history of dealing with multiple epidemics, both those with high-risk pathogens and those with high transmission rates. In such a scenario, Singapore taking the lead in biomedical and health technology shows its ambition to be a champion of health and biomedicine in the region. Ever since the SARS outbreak, there have been prominent efforts by the state and non-State actors to establish biomedical labs with world-class infrastructure. During the pandemic, this health diplomacy by Singapore was practised by what the Foreign Minister of Singapore, Vivian Balakrishnan, termed 'Test-kit diplomacy' (Amul & Pang, 2021). In the initial phase of the pandemic, when most countries were searching for easy diagnostic methods, Singapore was able to invent and distribute COVID test kits. Singapore developed Fortitude Kit 2.0, which did not have exclusive license for its manufacture anywhere in the world (CSC, 2021) which transmitted the message of Singapore as a reliable

partner and highlighted its goodwill. Singapore had also provided COVID handling protocols and guidelines to the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre Network for Public Health Emergencies. Private biomedical institutions' associations with foreign biomedical institutions and foreign centres setting up labs in Singapore have helped the country in its narrative as an innovation hub. Singapore also contributed to the WHO Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (Amul & Pang, 2021). Singapore is preparing for its first Biosafety Level 4 lab, which will be the first high-safety lab in Southeast Asia (Koh, 2021), making the country the sole contact point in the region to conduct high-level, risky tests of pathogens in a region that is vulnerable to pathogens and epidemics.

International Broadcasting

International broadcasting has a significant role in protecting the ideas of a nation and its position to the foreign public. Government-owned media broadcasting networks that function internationally try to create a positive image of the State. In the case of Singapore, CNA (Channel News Asia) acts as a medium through which the country can inform the foreign public about Singapore's way of life and political positioning. The channel is broadcast in 26 countries covering the Asia-Pacific region and has wide popularity in Southeast Asian countries. Shows such as Singapore Tonight, as well as interviews with the heads of state of other countries, etc., act as a bridge between Singapore and other countries. The local presence of Singapore news channels in other countries helps propagate Singapore's interests and narratives.

Similarly, other public diplomacy strategies are used, such as Singapore's education system, particularly 'Singapore Math, which is adapted into the curricula of the United States. Singaporeans are said to be far ahead in the PISA test conducted to evaluate educational systems. Today, many universities, such as the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University, etc., provide scholarships for foreign students to come and study in Singapore. The Singapore International Graduate Award, the Commonwealth Scholarship for Integrated Science, the Lee Kong Chian Scholarship, the SIA Youth Scholarships for students of ASEAN countries, the Singapore Millennium Foundation Scholarships, etc. are some of the scholarships provided to international students (Ministry of Education, 2024). (GWU, 2024)

All the strategies used by the State have their roots in the formation of Singapore itself. Singapore tourism's tagline, 'Passion Made Possible' rightly defines the rationale behind these strategies. It clearly depicts the vision of a small state that had to be built from scratch to make

the dreams of a stable and secure nation a reality. The highlighting of multiculturalism is done through landmarks such as Chinatown, Little India, the public housing policy to limit ethnic tussles, etc.

Singapore is a country that shows its economic might with the inflow of foreign investments and the interconnectedness that results from globalisation. As debates on deglobalisation are taking place, States like Singapore, whose economies are primarily based on the results of globalisation, might face considerable challenges.

The Impact of these Strategies on Singapore’s Image Building

The general image of Singapore is its skyscrapers, extravagant infrastructure, and the multinational companies that are headquartered there. The state's stringent intellectual property rights, low tax rate, world-class infrastructure, and transparency have led to companies being attracted to invest in the State. The open free-market economy and the willingness of Singapore to accommodate foreign companies have resulted in Singapore’s projection as a major hub of business and investment in Asia. The influence of Singapore over other countries in terms of doing business has only grown over the years. The Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) data released by the Department of Statistics Singapore proves the same.

Table 1. FDI Data Released by the DSS

Year	FDI (in \$ billion)
2011	702.5
2012	808.5
2013	905.8
2014	1112.3
2015	1268.1

2016	1352.4
2017	1562.2
2018	1726.2
2019	1917.3
2020	2146.5
2021	2479.0

(Source: Department of Statistics Singapore)

The FDI of the country in 2022 has also shown an increase from its previous year, showing the consistency of the country’s ability to attract foreign investments despite being hit by the pandemic (CIEC, 2023). The United States has investments in Singapore that are higher than those in South Korea and Japan combined, showing Singapore’s relevance as a business hub despite being a small state. The positive response of the country’s businesses and international parks in Malaysia and Indonesia and the deliberation over expanding this initiative to other Southeast Asian countries speak about the influence of the State. As estimated by ASEAN, around 37,000 foreign companies and 7,000 multinational companies have Asian regional headquarters in Singapore (Medina, 2022).

Singapore’s vision of its prominence as a global city is concreted by its multiculturalism and multiracialism. Multiracialism in Singapore helps the country project its acceptance of heterogeneity and welcoming nature. This heterogeneity and multiculturalism also help in expanding the network of multinational companies, given that the employees are from different parts of the world (GWU, 2024). Hawker culture is also an interesting addition, which reinforces the idea of togetherness in Singaporean life. Even though Hawker centres are prevalent in other Southeast Asian countries, the surveys conducted in other scholarly articles have found that tourists find Singapore’s Hawker Centres to be trustworthy because of Singapore’s images of a committed government towards its citizens and the hospitality provided to tourists (Henderson et al., 2012).

The influence of the film ‘Crazy Rich Asians’ which was set in Singapore with Singaporean characters was huge. Given below is a map based on the search trend generated using Google Trends with the keyword Crazy Rich Asian, with a year range of August 18, 2018 (the release date of the movie) to August 18, 2021.

Figure 3. Search Trend Generated using Google Trends

Interest by region 



(Source: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2018-08-18%202021-08-18&q=%2Fg%2F11g71c9nmg&hl=en>)

The show also helped boost the number of visitors to the country. After the release of the movie, it is said that there was a jump in the number of visitors. Around five million (Bloomberg, 2019) people visited the country.

Sustainability is the key attribute of Singapore, which has managed to go green and adapt to the demands of the modern world. Considering that Singapore is highly vulnerable to natural disasters caused by climate change, it was necessary for the government to pay close attention to sustainable models. The sustainable model followed by Singapore has made the country a credible voice in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This action of sustainability can also be seen in city diplomacy, which promotes liveable and sustainable cities.

Singapore has been investing in the biomedical industry and health for a long time, and the construction of a 'Biopolis' that provides space for a number of research labs is one of the main projects (Waldby, 2009). Singapore has been able to develop a strong position in terms of its R&D and innovation. This interest and investment in the biomedical sector were better materialised as a crisis response action during COVID-19 with the bulk production of an innovative COVID rapid test kit. The country exported these test kits to other countries without any exclusive license and also participated in the formulation of the Strategic Preparedness Plan.

Conclusion

In a world of strong powers exerting their economic and cultural power over other States, the visibility of small States depends on how effectively they can project themselves and make their voices heard. Singapore has been successful in finding a place for itself in the international system through various public diplomacy strategies. And for the same reason, it would not be an exaggeration to refer to Singapore as the leader of Small States, especially after the 1992 foundation of the Forum of Small States. Through various public diplomacy strategies such as the projection of businesses, tourism, city diplomacy, sustainable development, culture, and diversity, Singapore has been able to create an image of a highly-advanced, skilled State with world-class infrastructure. These strategies have been successful in attracting foreign investments and tourists and shaping a vibrant image of Singapore. As deglobalisation and the inward-looking of countries are being discussed today, Singapore, a nation that can be considered a product of globalisation, might face new challenges that would require new strategies. The new theme of Singapore tourism, 'Reimagining Singapore, which can be understood from the official promotional video of Singapore tourism, is somewhat a result of its realisation of this new challenge. It is hard to imagine a country with its image and power projection relying only on modern infrastructure, as it is difficult to sustain this image. A sense of history and authenticity in its identity is what results in a lasting effect. Today, when most countries are turning into technologically advanced countries with high-class infrastructure, what will make Singapore stand out in the long run is something to be pondered upon. This is where 'Reimagining Singapore' can be seen as a shift in the approach to branding Singapore. The new approach focuses on the other side of Singapore, which was never highlighted. There is a 'moving away' from the urban picturing and imagery of Singapore as a land of skyscrapers

that can be considered tracing back to the foundational idea of Singaporean success, which is based on building something new out of its natural constraints.

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