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The escalating trade war between the U.S. and China is chilling global collaboration that has long driven breakthroughs in technology and science. The tiny island nation of Singapore is trying to carve out an independent role in the clash and demonstrate the advantages of cooperation in fields like artificial intelligence.

It's a difficult balancing act. The country, with cordial ties to the two superpowers, is fighting against nationalistic forces on both sides. Artificial intelligence is becoming something of a test case for how independent countries will participate in emerging technologies.

China and the U.S. have dominated AI development, raising concerns that other countries will lose out on its benefits and have no voice in devising regulations. Yet Singapore's government is investing S\$500 million (\$360 million) on AI and other digital technologies through 2020 and has attracted Chinese and American companies to the country with policies that support AI research. Singapore's Communications and Information Minister S. Iswaran jumped into the debate this year, proposing a framework for the ethical use of AI at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

"Singapore has an important role to play," said Lawrence Loh, an associate professor at NUS Business School. "We will never be able to match the technological prowess of the U.S. and China, but there are certain areas where Singapore can take leadership like using its position to get people to work together."

Iswaran will elaborate on Singapore's vision at Bloomberg's Sooner Than You Think technology conference on Thursday. He will kick off an event that will feature speakers from Microsoft Corp., International Business Machines Corp., Temasek Holdings Pte, China AI pioneer SenseTime Group Ltd., as well as Southeast Asia's leading tech startups Grab Holdings Inc. and Gojek.

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Singapore has long positioned itself as neutral ground. It's already home to the Singapore International Arbitration Centre and the Singapore International Commercial Court, forums for international dispute resolution. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in his annual policy speech last month that Singapore will maintain its neutral position and not take sides between the U.S. and China.

The affluent city-state of 5.6 million is not leaving anything to chance when it comes to future-proofing its economy.

It has set up a dedicated inter-agency task force to study all aspects of AI. And in recent weeks, it granted an AI patent to Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. within just three months — a record pace that underlines the country's determination to move full speed ahead.

"Singapore plays a pivotal role as it facilitates our entry into markets of our interest rapidly," Benjamin Bai, vice president and chief IP counsel of Alibaba-affiliate Ant Financial, said in a statement released by the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore.

Still, there is skepticism about the country's prospects. Singapore, like several other countries, is making a genuine push to develop its AI ecosystem, but its effort is tiny compared with the giants, said Kai-Fu Lee, founder of the venture firm Sinovation Ventures. "Unless Singapore can unify ASEAN and become the undisputed AI leader and supplier in ASEAN countries, its efforts will not lead to a fraction of the U.S. or China," Lee said in an email.

The government has been stepping up efforts to lure companies working in AI.

Alibaba has opened its first joint research institute outside China in Singapore in collaboration with Nanyang Technological University, while Salesforce.com Inc. opened its first AI research center outside of its research and development hub of Palo Alto, California — adding to a growing list of new research centers including the Singapore Management University's Centre for AI and Data Governance.

GIC Pte, Singapore's sovereign wealth fund, has invested in Canadian AI companies, including Montreal-based Element AI Inc., which has set up an office in the city-state after raising \$102 million in new funding in 2017.

"It's very hard to see how things will pan out with the trade war," NUS Business School's Loh said. "Singapore's focus should be technology, not geopolitics."

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