

## CHAPTER 6

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# Singapore's Security Outlook in 2013: A More Turbulent East Asia

*Lam Peng Er*

### Outlook in 2013: Great Powers & ASEAN Neighbors

Although Singapore did not face any imminent threats in its Southeast Asian neighborhood, it was concerned that the festering territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas will impact negatively on regional peace, stability, and multilateral cooperation. The city-state was troubled by the deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations over territorial disputes, competing historical narratives, and Beijing's abrupt announcement of an ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone) which extended over the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands.

In December 2013, Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen remarked at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C.: "In the East China Sea, strong nationalist sentiments have been roused in both China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Tit-for-tat deployments of patrol and naval vessels of both countries have occurred. Fighter jets have been scrambled to respond to aircraft overflights... Strong reactions have also occurred in response to the recent air defense identification zone designated by China. While no physical incidents have occurred as yet, the risks are not theoretical."<sup>1</sup>

The editorial of the *Straits Times*, Singapore's leading English newspaper, opined on China's ADIZ declaration: "What is left for the world to hope for is that Chinese enforcement will be circumspect, to avoid incidents and an impression of unwarranted airspace overlordship. All of Asia now waits to see what China might do next to complete a cordon sanitaire. If zones are declared over the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, where territory is also contested, ASEAN would wonder about China's good faith in negotiating a code of conduct to regular disputes. ... These recent developments have made East Asia a more dangerous place."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen, "Promises and perils of Asia's rise," *Straits Times*, 16 December 2013.

<sup>2</sup> "Editorial: Xi and Abe hold region's hopes in their hands," *Straits Times*, 11 December 2013.

That Singapore asked China to clarify what the zone means for civil aviation can be interpreted as a sign of concern about its implantation and consequences.<sup>3</sup> The Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs also expressed its “regret” about Prime Minister Abe Shinzo’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013.<sup>4</sup> Though Singapore is a minuscule state, it did not hesitate to question the actions of Beijing and Tokyo, given their implications for the stability of East Asia.

Singapore has pragmatically and consistently adopted a grand strategy which has served it well in recent decades. This strategy promotes a balance of power in Southeast Asia among the great powers, emphasises good relations with its immediate neighbors Malaysia and Indonesia and the other ASEAN states, supports ASEAN-centric multilateral institutions in East Asia, and nurtures excellent bilateral ties with the US, China, and Japan.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, Singapore walks the strategic tightrope by balancing between close security cooperation with the US superpower and close economic cooperation with the PRC, a rising power and potential rival to the US.

In 2013, China and Singapore agreed to jointly build a sprawling food zone (1,450 sq km) in Jilin in Northern China that will supply quality meat and produce to China and beyond. Singapore has a 40% share in that joint project.<sup>6</sup> The city-state has become an offshore Chinese yuan center by joining Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau in having a yuan clearing bank.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Singapore and China have established a JCBC (Joint Council Bilateral Cooperation) since 2003 to facilitate better bilateral ties. China’s Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli, the seventh-ranked leader, is a co-chair of

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<sup>3</sup> “Singapore concerned over airspace tensions: Prime Minister,” *Straits Times*, 14 December 2013.

<sup>4</sup> “Singapore regrets Japanese Prime Minister’s visit to Yasukuni Shrine: Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” *Straits Times*, 29 December 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Some China Mainland analysts observed: “Singapore hopes to keep all stakeholders actively involved in regional affairs through various regional cooperation mechanisms. To Singapore’s leaders, it is better to maintain its own security through regional competition among several big countries, than to hand over its fate to one big country.” See “Singapore’s balancing strategy,” *Straits Times*, 2 October 2013. This article first appeared on 27 September of China’s *Global Times*.

On Singapore’s balance of power approach, see Bilahari Kausikan, “Uncharted waters for tiny Singapore to navigate,” *Straits Times*, 28 December 2014. Bilahari was permanent secretary of Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He wrote in the same article: “Small countries can enjoy autonomy by finding a balance between major powers, but this is harder under today’s conditions of flux.”

See Captain Cai Dexian, “Hedging for maximum flexibility: Singapore’s pragmatic approach to security relations with the US and China,” *Pointer: Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces*, Vol.39, No.2, 2013, pp.1-12.

<sup>6</sup> “Bigger stake for China in Sino-Singapore food zone,” *Straits Times*, 25 July 2013.

<sup>7</sup> “Direct currency trading ‘boosts Singapore’s status as yuan hub,’” *Straits Times*, 23 October 2013 and “China, Singapore inks 7 deals to boost ties,” *Straits Times*, 23 October 2013.

the meetings for the JCBC, and other key bilateral bodies: the 15th Suzhou Industrial Park Joint Steering Council and the sixth Tianjin Eco-City Joint Steering Committee.<sup>8</sup>

Singapore views the US as the indispensable anchor of the regional security architecture.<sup>9</sup> Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam affirmed in January 2013: “The US’ role as a global superpower has been increasingly questioned in recent years. The US economy has suffered, swinging from the mortgage crisis to a financial crisis, and now a crisis over debt sustainability. This has led many in Asia to be dismissive of the US. In many ways, the US continues to have tremendous potential. They have the best universities in the world. The US’ technological and military lead is unlikely to be surpassed in the near future.”<sup>10</sup>

In December 2013, the US announced that it will deploy two more littoral combat ships to the city-state in the next two years as part of its “rebalancing” to the Asia Pacific region. Up to four deployments by end 2016 are planned.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding Singapore’s desire for a continual US strategic presence in East Asia, the city-state was disappointed if not disconcerted by the polarization in American domestic politics leading to a “fiscal cliff” and a temporary federal government shutdown which resulted in President Barrack Obama missing a key APEC meeting in Bali in October 2013.<sup>12</sup>

A flabbergasted *Straits Times* editorial remarked: “This (Federal) debt crisis is over but history might repeat itself. The national debt represents a weapon that can be used to achieve almost any political purpose. This a cautionary thought for people and governments which believe in Pax Americana. ... Every time American politicians misbehave, they nudge others to look beyond Pax Americana.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Chinese Vice PM meets DPM Teo,” *Straits Times*, 22 October 2013.

<sup>9</sup> “Singapore, US pledge to promote stable Asia,” *Straits Times*, 14 December 2013.

<sup>10</sup> “Minister K. Shanmugam’s speech at the 2013 annual Turkish Ambassadors’ Conference in Ankara, Turkey, 4 January 2013.

<sup>11</sup> “US plans more LCS deployments to Singapore in next two years,” *Today* (Singapore), 14 December 2013. See also “US warship arrives in Singapore for Southeast Asia deployment,” *Channel News Asia* (Singapore), 18 April 2013.

<sup>12</sup> “APEC 2013: US government shutdown unhelpful given its long-term issues, says PM Lee,” *Straits Times*, 6 October 2013. The media reported: “Singapore’s prime minister openly criticized the United States over the government shutdown and ongoing deadlock over the debt ceiling, calling them ‘problems you have created for yourself in a game of chicken.’” See “Singapore PM criticizes US ‘game of chicken,’” *CNN*, 8 October 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, “When faith in US is shaken, not stirred,” *Straits Times*, 19 October 2013.

While the US has the desire to “rebalance” or “pivot” back to Asia, many Southeast Asians, including Singaporeans, ask whether the US has the financial wherewithal and the political will to do so in the long run amidst the inexorable rise of China. The reality is that the US is a superpower often distracted by regional crises in regions beyond East Asia, especially the Middle East, and by its antagonistic domestic politics. The perplexing question then is: Does the US have the staying power to balance a rising and more assertive China?

Unlike the great powers, tiny Singapore does not have the capability to reshape the strategic landscape. But the city-state actively supports ASEAN centrality in regional multilateralism such as the APT, ARF, and ADMM Plus, and welcomes the formation of an ASEAN Community by 2015. Singapore also hosts the annual Shangri La Dialogue to provide an additional high level forum for frank strategic discourse, interaction, and understanding in the region.

### **SAF Abroad: Gulf of Aden, Afghanistan, Exercises & Humanitarian Relief**

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has been honing its skills by its deployment abroad for various missions and exercises. In June 2013, the SAF concluded a stint in Afghanistan with a ceremony marking the end of its campaign at the multinational base, Tarin Kowt, in the province Orzgan. The SAF’s contribution in Afghanistan included the training of artillery forces, and medical support, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction efforts.<sup>14</sup> Since May 2007, the SAF has deployed close to 500 personnel to Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

The SAF also announced that a fifth Republic of Singapore Navy task group, comprising a frigate and a naval helicopter, will join the counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden from March to June 2014. Since 2009, the city-state has sent four ships and more than 1,200 personnel to aid the multi-national efforts under Combined Task Force 151 to protect merchant ships passing through the pirate-infested waters between Yemen and Somalia.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For a summary of the SAF’s roles in Afghanistan, see “Peace support in Afghanistan,” see *Pioneer* (monthly publication of the SAF), July 2013, pp.14-17.

<sup>15</sup> “SAF ends Afghan deployment,” *Straits Times*, 26 June 2013.

<sup>16</sup> “Navy to deploy 5<sup>th</sup> task group to fight piracy at Gulf of Aden,” *Today* (Singapore), 25 October 2013.

In 2013, the SAF announced that more than 1,300 SAF armor troops will spend over 100 days in Nato-Bergen, Northeastern Germany under a new training agreement that allows them to sharpen their firing and maneuvering skills at a biannual drill named Panzer Strike.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Germany is among the dozen or so countries (eg. the US, India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Brunei) where the SAF conducts overseas training. In November the same year, the SAF also assisted in humanitarian and disaster relief when it deployed C-130 aircraft to help with the relief effort to the Philippines, following the devastation in that country caused by Typhoon Haiyan.<sup>18</sup>

## **FY2013 Defense Budget, Weapons Acquisitions, Cyber Defense & Water Security**

Without a formal alliance partner, Singapore must rely primarily on itself for national defense. To attain this goal, the country has a national conscription system for all its able-bodied, young men. The SAF also allocated a generous defense budget annually to build the most technologically advanced military in Southeast Asia. In FY2013, Singapore's defense expenditure was raised from S\$11.8 billion (FY2012) to S\$12.3 billion, an increase of 4.3%. Simply put, this considerable defense budget is meant to build a stronger SAF for deterrence.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding the city-state's hefty defense spending, it still chalked up a budget surplus of S\$3.9 billion in the same financial year.<sup>20</sup>

That Singapore is an affluent state with deep national reserves means that it avoids a "feast and famine" approach in its various weapon acquisition programs. According to a 2013 report, Singapore was the world's fifth largest arms importer, securing 4 percent of the global arms imports from 2008 to 2012. Singapore is also the world's 20th biggest arms exporter or third largest Asian exporter behind China and South Korea.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "SAF to double training time in Germany," *Straits Times*, 26 April 2013.

<sup>18</sup> "SAF sends relief supplies to the Philippines, helps in evacuation," *Channel News Asia* (Singapore), 13 November 2013.

<sup>19</sup> See interview with Minister of Defense Ng Eng Hen, "Building a stronger SAF," *Pioneer* (monthly publication of the SAF), Issue 430, August 2013, pp.12-14.

<sup>20</sup> "Surplus up S3.9 billion with revenue surge," *Straits Times*, 26 February 2013.

<sup>21</sup> "Singapore: Number 20 in weapons exports," *Straits Times*, 21 March 2013.

In 2013, the SAF upgraded some of its weapon systems. It announced that the Republic of Singapore Air Force's (RSAF) 24 F-15 SG fighters had become operational in September that year. Moreover, in the same year, the RSAF was in the final stages of deciding if it would buy the next generation F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.<sup>22</sup> The SAF also indicated that it would buy a new Aster-30 surface-to-air missile system to boost its air defense shield. Apparently, this missile system can simultaneously fire missiles at eight different targets with a few seconds' notice.<sup>23</sup>

Singapore also announced that it will buy two brand new submarines known as Type 218SG by the German defense contractor ThyssenKrupp Marine System. These submarines are fitted with a state-of-the-art Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) system that allows the vessels to spend a longer time at sea. The submarine's AIP system can: "give the submarines expanded capacities for operations like anti-submarine warfare or trailing surface ships in areas such as the South China Sea or the Straits of Malacca."<sup>24</sup> The Type 218SG submarines are expected to be delivered to the Singapore navy by 2020.

The army also officially unveiled its new Wide Area Communications (WAC) system which comprised the "Digitized Trunk Communications System (D-TCS) and the Ku-Band satellite Communications (Ku-Band Satcom) System."<sup>25</sup> The media noted: "The D-TCS is the first massive overhaul of the SAF signal infrastructure in 22 years. ...It allows the soldier on the ground to be more aware of what is happening around him. The DTCs can also integrate communication systems used in the battlefield into a single network...It will improve the information flow between different SAF platforms like the mini unmanned aerial vehicles, Terrex infantry carrier vehicles and main battle tanks."<sup>26</sup> The SAF also announced the setting up of Cyber Defense Operations HUB to address growing threat of online attacks by spies and hackers.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> RSAF's F-15 fighter jets battle-ready," *Straits Times*, 19 September 2013. See "Singapore moves to buy latest US stealth fighter," *International Herald Tribune*, 15 March 2013.

<sup>23</sup> "SAF to buy Aster-30 missile system," *Straits Times*, 17 September 2013.

<sup>24</sup> "Singapore to buy two brand new submarines," *Straits Times*, 3 December 2013.

<sup>25</sup> *Pioneer* explains: "The significant increase in bandwidth also enables troops to engage in video-conferencing, transmit high-resolution videos and photos, as well as share data and files in real-time." See "Enhancing the Army's battlefield info-sharing network," *Pioneer* (A monthly publication of the SAF), Issue 429, July 2013, p.5.

<sup>26</sup> "Army's EAC gear boosts signal strength," *Straits Times*, 11 May 2013.

<sup>27</sup> "New SAF cyber unit to fight online threats," *Straits Times*, 1 July 2013. See also "Singapore's cyber defense firepower gets \$130 m boost," *Straits Times*, 26 October 2013.

Perhaps unique in Singapore's security outlook is its relentless desire to lessen its dependence on imported water from Malaysia by attaining greater self-sufficiency. In September 2013, the city-state's second and largest desalination plant (Tuaspring Desalination Plant) was opened at a cost of S\$1.05 billion. This latest desalination plant more than triples the country's capacity to turn seawater into fresh water to meet up to a quarter of its total demand (up to 70 million gallons of water a day).<sup>28</sup>

## Challenges Ahead

Singapore society is ageing rapidly and is facing rising social inequality. There is also increasing discontent in the Singapore electorate leading to an erosion in electoral support for the ruling People's Action Party, the perennial party in power. The next general election must be called by 2016. Increasingly, there are murmurings in social media that Singapore must spend more on social safety nets and less on defense. Simply put, this is a classic "guns versus butter" issue. In reality, Singapore can actually pay for both "guns and butter" given its annual budget surplus and substantial national reserves.

Conceivably, democratization and the trend of more opposition MPs in parliament is likely to result in greater scrutiny of the country's defense budget. In 2013, the Workers' Party, the main opposition party in parliament, demanded "more openness on military spending."<sup>29</sup> According to the Transparency International's first Government Defense Anti-Corruption Index, Singapore fared poorly in areas like financial risk, as no specific legislation regulates defense procurement.

Besides a conceivable budget squeeze in the long run, the SAF is also faced with a "demographic squeeze." About 21,000 males enlisted for national service in 2011. But given the declining birth rate, the number is expected to shrink to about 15,000 per year in future. Adding more women will boost the ranks and ensure that the SAF can still quickly mobilize around 300,000 soldiers from regulars, conscripts, and reserves.<sup>30</sup> The SAF's approach is to opt for a high-tech military to compensate for fewer conscripts.

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<sup>28</sup> "Another milestone as second desalination plant opens," *Straits Times*, 19 September 2013.

<sup>29</sup> "WP calls for more openness on military spending," *Straits Times*, 12 March 2013.

<sup>30</sup> "SAF to recruit more women," *Sunday Times* (Singapore), 21 July 2013.

Many ASEAN states such as Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia are facing uncertain political change in the next few years. Though Singapore desires a strong ASEAN which is a key player in the regional balance of power, it is unclear whether most ASEAN states will evolve into prosperous, stable, and harmonious partners underpinning a strong and resilient regional organization.

The city-state hopes for a continual and credible US presence in East Asia and that China's rise will be a peaceful one. But since peace and security for Singapore are not guaranteed given the rising turbulence in the region, it will continue to buy a long term, premium insurance policy by investing heavily in digitized, hi-tech weapon systems for its own deterrence.