

CHAPTER 6

Singapore Security Outlook 2017: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

LAM Peng Er

2017 was a very challenging year for Singapore to walk the strategic tightrope between China and the United States. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong candidly remarked on perceived Chinese unhappiness over Singapore's ties with the United States: "If America-China relations become very difficult, our position becomes tougher. Because then we will be coerced to choose between being friends with America, and friends with China. That is the real worry".¹

Beijing was unhappy with the city-state's emphasis on a "rule-based" international order and the application of international law to the disputed South China Sea issue.² China also disapproved of the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) military training in Taiwan. Singapore's approach has always been to seek closer economic cooperation with China to enhance better bilateral relations. But it is unclear whether this strategy will work in the long run because a rising China will need Singapore less economically and as a model of good governance.³ Moreover, economic interdependency cannot guarantee that geo-strategic differences will be settled amiably.

Though Singapore has strategically aligned with the US since the Cold War era, it is faced with a new and unpredictable (if not chaotic) Trump Administration with an America First agenda. The US quit the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). Given the US preoccupation with the North Korean nuclearization issue and problems in other regions, it is unclear whether the US will resolutely act on excessive Chinese claims in the disputed South China Sea.

¹ "Prime Minister: Singapore's position will become tougher if US-China tensions rise", *Straits Times* (Singapore), 2 March 2017. See also "Prime Minister underlines Singapore's policy towards superpowers", *Straits Times* (Singapore), 15 July 2017.

² Singapore has urged all claimant parties in the disputed South China Sea to resolve their differences via international law including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. See "Japan, Singapore: Let law settle South China Sea rows", *Japan Times*, 9 September 2012. On Singapore's preference for a rule-based order, see "Vivian makes case for rules-based, open world order", *Straits Times*, 28 September 2017.

³ Singapore has trained more than 55,000 Chinese officials in the city-state on its model of good governance.

Coping with a Rising China

Singapore-China relations were rocky in early 2017. On 23 November the year before, the Hong Kong Port Authority, presumably at the behest of Beijing, impounded nine Terrex armoured vehicles of the SAF en route from annual military exercises in Taiwan. Hong Kong announced the release of the vehicles only after a two-month stand-off.⁴ Arguably, Chinese strong armed tactics towards Singapore signifies a rising China more assertive and occasionally “nasty” towards its neighbours.

Apparently, Beijing was displeased with Singapore for at least three reasons: its annual military exercises in Taiwan, the city-state’s support for international law to settle international disputes (including the South China Sea with six claimant parties), and close strategic alignment with the United States. Beijing did not kick up a fuss before on Singapore’s long standing military exercises in Taiwan conducted since 1975 and did not make the SAF’s presence in Taiwan an issue when Sino-Singapore diplomatic relations were forged in 1990. However, Beijing is more suspicious of Taiwan today (considered by Mainland Chinese to be its renegade province) especially when the island is led by a pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party President Tsai Ing-wen. To squeeze the SAF out of Taiwan is tantamount to further isolating Taiwan internationally and “punishing” Singapore for annoying China for the above mentioned reasons. It appears that Beijing was “killing two birds with one stone”.

Some Mainland Chinese perceive that Singapore should act in a more circumspect way when it is the coordinator for ASEAN-China relations (2015-18). Moreover, there is the apparent expectation among some Mainland Chinese that Singapore, with a majoritarian Chinese ethnic population, ought to understand and be more sympathetic to China’s strategic concerns.⁵ This simplistic assumption is that

⁴ “Hong Kong to return seized Singapore armoured vehicles”, *Financial Times*, 24 January 2017. The same article noted: “Shortly after the seizure in November, the nationalist Chinese tabloid Global Times accused Singapore of ‘hypocrisy’ in maintaining relations with Taiwan. ‘For quite some time, Singapore has been pretending to seek a balance between China and the US, yet has been taking Washington’s side in reality,’ the newspaper said. ‘It is no longer reasonable for Singapore to continue... any kind of military exchange with Taiwan.’”

⁵ Ambassador Tommy Koh wrote: “The fact that the majority of Singaporeans are ethnic Chinese is both an asset and a liability in the bilateral relations between Singapore and China. It is an asset because we speak the same language and use the same script, eat similar food and share some common values on education, family, the individual and the state, rights and responsibility, etc. It is, however, also a liability because it has given rise to unreasonable expectations on the part of China towards Singapore. Many friends in China mistakenly perceive Singapore as a Chinese nation, describing us as ‘kith and kin’. They feel that since Singaporeans are fellow Chinese, we should have a better understanding of China’s policies than the other ASEAN countries. They also

ethnicity and cultural affinity should naturally be translated into better understanding of Chinese sensitivities.⁶ It is ironical that China does not seem to understand Singapore (or choose not to understand Singapore) despite claims of cultural affinity.

A rising and hubristic China seems to have a sense of entitlement that small states like Singapore should defer to the biggest Asian one within the framework and logic of an East Asian power hierarchy.⁷ But Singapore is a sovereign state not located off the coast of China but embedded in ASEAN and the “Malay world” in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the core values of the city-state is based on multi-culturalism, ethnic equality of all races, rule of law and non-corruptibility. The fundamental principle of Singapore as a small state is not to grovel to larger ones for its own survival and self-respect.⁸ If Singapore were to buckle under the pressure of regional great powers whenever they are displeased, then the city-state’s future as a sovereign state will be precarious and bleak indeed.

Beijing petulantly refused to invite Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to its inaugural Belt and Road Forum attended by 29 heads of states and government, and 1,500 government officials and experts from more than 130 countries in May 2017.⁹ This “ostracism” of Singapore is quite ironical because the city-state is the

expect Singapore to support China’s policies. I believe that this is one source of misunderstanding between us. China has to understand that Singapore is a multiracial and not a Chinese nation. Further, as a sovereign and independent country, Singapore’s interests are not always similar to those of China”. See Tommy Koh, “China’s perception of Singapore: 4 areas of misunderstanding”, *Straits Times*, 21 October 2016.

⁶ An analyst argues that Beijing has the tendency to exploit the Chinese overseas (ethnic Chinese who are citizens of other states) for its own interests. To China, the Chinese overseas are a source of socio-political and economic capital which it will expediently tap for its own internal needs. Arguably, the attitude of China’s state and society towards Singapore and its Singaporean Chinese citizens falls within this general pattern. See Leo Suryadinata, *The Rise of China and the Chinese Overseas: A Study of Beijing’s Changing Policy in Southeast Asia and Beyond* (Singapore, ISEAS, 2017).

⁷ At the 12th China-Singapore Forum held in Beijing in May 2017, senior Chinese diplomat Ruan Zongze attacked Singapore for allegedly taking actions in recent years that adversely affected bilateral ties. According to Ruan, these include trying to get other ASEAN states to release a joint statement after the PCA ruled against Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and saying publicly that the tribunal’s award is legally binding and countries should abide by it. Ruan also said that the city-state has allowed the US to deploy military vessels and aircraft to monitor “China’s South China Sea”. See “Tommy Koh rebuts view that Singapore has acted against China”, *Straits Times*, 11 May 2017.

⁸ At the ruling People’s Action Party Annual Conference in 2017, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong affirmed that Singapore must not wilt under pressure from great powers. He said: “Singapore’s relations with US and China are in good order There will always be ups and downs in relations with other countries, big and small, but Singapore’s fundamental approach should not change. It should take a long-term view, by not taking good relations for granted and more importantly, not cowering or becoming flustered when relations are down. No foreign country should ever influence Singapore’s domestic debate and politics, so Singaporeans need to understand their country’s core interests, to stay united in the face of challenges”. See “Key points from PM Lee Hsien Loong’s speech at the annual PAP convention”, *Straits Times*, 19 November 2017.

⁹ See “What New Silk Road snub means for Singapore’s ties with China”, *South China Morning Post*, 18 May 2017 and “China Frictions May See Singapore Miss Out on Belt-Road Billions”, *Bloomberg*, 19 May 2017.

number one foreign investor in China, has three major government-to-government projects in the Chinese Mainland (Suzhou industrial park, Tianjin-Singapore eco-city and Chongqing connectivity initiative) and a considerable role in the Belt and Road scheme. Singapore Home Affairs and Law Minister (and ex-Foreign Minister) K. Shanmugam noted that 30 percent of China's Belt and Road investments in all countries are in Singapore. In return, Singapore's investments in China account for 85 percent of total Belt and Road investments there by all countries.¹⁰

But relations mended when China invited Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to Beijing for an official visit in September 2017 and talks with its top leaders just a month before the important 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.¹¹ According to the media, "Singapore is looking to collaborate with China on the mega project in areas such as infrastructure connectivity, financing, and third-party collaboration that could include the training of officials in countries along the 'Belt and Road'. Both leaders also discussed the Southern Transport Corridor, a new trade route between western China and South-east Asia".¹²

Though both countries hit a rough patch in their relations during the first half of the year, bilateral ties improved for at least four reasons. First, it is still in the common interests of both states not to let their long standing, multi-faceted relations deteriorate. Simply put, Singapore is still useful to China as its number one foreign investor, and key facilitator for some of its Belt and Road projects.

Second, Singapore also benefited from the de-escalation of tension in the South China Sea after Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte took office end June 2017. Duterte did not push for the PCA (Permanent Court of Arbitration) ruling on the disputed South China Sea as the template for his country's interaction with China. If the new Filipino President had emphasized the role of international law towards the South China Sea dispute, Singapore, as a small state and ASEAN member, would have done likewise. In Singapore's strategic thinking, small states benefit most from a rule-based order. Such an approach by the city-state would have irritated Beijing

¹⁰ "Singapore in 'a position to benefit' from Belt and Road push", *Straits Times*, 29 August 2017.

¹¹ See "Singapore pledges to work with China on Belt, Road vision", *Straits Times*, 14 July 2017; "Singapore, China look to new areas of cooperation", *Straits Times*, 21 September 2017; "China places great importance on ties with Singapore: Premier Li", *Straits Times*, 20 September 2017; "How Singapore-China ties have kept up with the times", *Straits Times*, 20 September 2017 and "Singapore, China aim to take ties forward: Prime Minister Lee", *Straits Times*, 22 September 2017.

¹² "Warm, long-standing' ties reaffirmed as PM kicks off China visit", *Today* (Singapore), 19 September 2017.

who seemed to think that international law has been cunningly harnessed by its opponents to constrain it.

Third, it is not in Beijing's interest to downgrade its diplomatic relations with Singapore because the latter is the coordinator for ASEAN-China relations and also slated to take over the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2018. Fourth, China cannot be constantly angry with Singapore because the former has other more pressing issues to deal with such as relentless North Korean nuclearization and South Korea's deployment of THAAD to address the North Korean threat but deemed to be injurious to Chinese security interests.

The rocky ties between Beijing and Singapore in the first half of 2017 also triggered an unprecedented public split in the city-state's foreign policy establishment. According to Kishore Mahbubani (then Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore and former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) argued that small states must behave like small states: "We are now in the post-Lee Kuan Yew era. Sadly, we will probably never again have another globally respected statesman like Mr Lee. As a result, we should change our behaviour significantly".¹³ Kishore continued: "What's the first thing we should do? Exercise discretion. We should be very restrained in commenting on matters involving great powers".¹⁴ Kishore concluded: "Hence, it would have been wiser to be more circumspect on the judgment of an international tribunal on the arbitration which the Philippines instituted against China concerning the South China Sea dispute, especially since the Philippines, which was involved in the case, did not want to press it".¹⁵

Bilahari Kausikan, another former Permanent Secretary of the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rebuked Kishore's thesis (that Singapore must behave like a small state) for being "muddled, mendacious, and indeed dangerous".¹⁶ Bilahari also noted: "Singapore did not survive and prosper by being anybody's tame poodle".¹⁷ Law and Home Affairs Minister (and ex-Foreign Minister) K. Shanmugam weighed in the

¹³ Kishore Mahbubani, "Qatar: Big lessons from a small country", *Straits Times*, 1 July 2017.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Minister Shanmugam, diplomats Bilahari and Ong Keng Yong say Prof Mahbubani's view on Singapore's foreign policy 'flawed'", *Straits Times*, 2 July 2017.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

debate: “Mr Lee (Kuan Yew and Singapore’s first Prime Minister) never advocated cravenness, or thinking small. Did we get to where we are now, by thinking “small”? No. ... That is why Singapore was and is respected, despite being one of the smallest countries in the world.”¹⁸

In July 2017, Minister of Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan reiterated: “Some people have suggested that Singapore lay low and ‘suffer what we must’. On the contrary, it is precisely because we are a small state that we have to stand up and be counted when we need to do so. ... We must not become a vassal state. We cannot be bought or bullied. We must be prepared to defend our territory, assets and way of life”.¹⁹ These are noble sentiments but it remains to be seen whether Singaporeans can remain united, calm and resolute if unfriendly great powers were to “turn the screw” on their country in the years ahead.

Coping with Trump’s “America First”

The TPP began as an expansion of the Trans Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement among Singapore, Brunei, Chile and New Zealand in 2005. However, Singapore was deeply disappointed when the Trump Administration withdrew the US from the TPP. The TPP minus the US (the largest economy in the world) will simply reduce its gravitas. Nevertheless, Singapore is pressing ahead with TPP minus one and hope that the US will join the TPP one day in the not too distant future. Having the US anchored in the Asia-Pacific is essential to Singapore’s geo-strategic interest to balance China’s heft.

Notwithstanding its disappointment with the US quitting the TPP, Singapore maintained its close strategic relations with the US.²⁰ According to the media: “The Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) and the United States Navy (USN) have completed the inaugural bilateral Exercise Pacific Griffin in the waters off Guam. The exercise which was held between August 19 and September 2 was part of ongoing efforts to explore new training spaces and opportunities for the Singapore Armed

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Vivian Balakrishnan, “Vital to have consensus at home on foreign policy priorities”, *Straits Times* (Singapore), 19 July 2017.

²⁰ “Singapore-US relationship is deep, very sound: Prime Minister Lee”, *Straits Times*, 21 October 2017. According to Lee, this bilateral tie is based on congruence of views and close cooperation over the years. See also “US must ‘stay engaged in Asia, seek understanding with China’”, *Straits Times*, 28 October 2017.

Forces (SAF), MINDEF (Ministry of Defence) added. ‘With the vast training space available in the waters off Guam, Exercise Pacific Griffin provided the RSN with the opportunity to conduct high-end exercises of substantial scope and complexity’ ... ‘The exercise featured advanced warfare training between the RSN and USN, across the full-spectrum of anti-submarine, anti-surface and anti-air warfare.’²¹ The Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) is also exploring the possibility of conducting fighter training in Guam.²²

Symbolizing the close ties between the US and Singapore, four Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) CH-47 Chinooks assisted the Texas Army National Guard’s Hurricane Harvey disaster relief operations in August 2017. The quartet of helicopters were based at the RSAF’s Peace Prairie detachment in Texas.²³ In the same month, the SAF and the United States Marine Corps (USMC) concluded the 26th edition of the annual bilateral Exercise Valiant Mark. According to Singapore Ministry of Defense, about 850 personnel from the 7th Singapore Infantry Brigade, USMC 3rd Battalion of the 7th Marine Regiment, and USMC 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment participated in the exercise.²⁴

Earlier in August 2016 during a joint news conference with then President Barack Obama after their bilateral meeting at the Oval Office, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that the SAF will increase its contribution to the multinational coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by deploying a medical support team to Iraq from 2017 onwards.²⁵

In October the following year, Lee met President Donald Trump in the Oval Office. Following their meeting, Lee and Trump witnessed the signing of a deal between

²¹ “Singapore, US navies complete inaugural exercise off Guam”, *Channel News Asia*, 4 September 2017. For details on the new Singapore and US naval exercises, see “Hunter Games”, *Pioneer*, October 2017, pp.18-21.

²² “Air force looking into fighter training in Guam”, *Straits Times*, 5 August 2016. The same article notes that the city-state trains or stations approximately a thousand personnel each year in the US. It reported: “The RSAF has four detachments in the US --- two in Arizona and one each in Texas and Idaho. It has one more in France and another two in Australia --- Queensland and Perth”.

²³ “4 RSAF Chinook helicopters arrive to assist in Hurricane Harvey relief operations”, *Straits Times*, 31 August 2017.

²⁴ MINDEF, “SAF Concludes Annual Exercise with the United States Marine Corps”, 31 August 2017. Another major SAF exercise in the US was Forging Sabre 2017 held in Arizona. See “Exercise Forging Sabre 2017”, *Straits Times*, 7 December 2017 and “SAF scores several firsts with US live-firing exercise”, *Straits Times*, 6 December 2017. See also “Singapore Armed Forces advances air-land strike capabilities with ‘Forging Sabre’” *Jane’s 360*, 6 December 2017.

²⁵ “Singapore to increase contribution to multinational counter-ISIS coalition: PM Lee”, *Channel News Asia*, 3 August 2016.

Singapore Airlines and Boeing for the national carrier to buy 39 new planes. The deal, worth US\$13.8 billion (S\$18.7 billion), will create 70,000 jobs in the US. The media quoted Trump: “We do a lot of business with Singapore. The relationship now is at its highest point and it will continue”.²⁶

Coping with Urban Warfare, Cyber Security and Terrorism

As a small state and not formally allied to any great powers, Singapore has a considerable defence budget to ensure its security. Its 2017 defence budget was S\$14.2 billion (US\$10 billion), a modest increase over spending the previous year.²⁷ During the March 2017 parliamentary debate on the city-state’s defence budget, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen announced a major effort to shore up its cyber-security capabilities. The media noted: “the Defence Ministry will not only set up a new cyber command but also rope in national servicemen as part of a new cyber-defence vocation. The vocation, under the Singapore Armed Forces, will see selected soldiers deployed from August. These ‘cyber-defenders’ will fan out across the new Defence Cyber Organisation, which will also house the SAF’s new Cyber Defence Group. The aim is to have about 2,600 servicemen — regulars as well as full-time and operationally ready NSmen (national service) men — on board in about a decade”.²⁸

Defence Minister Ng also mentioned in parliament that the SAF’s western SAFTI training area will be revamped into a new “SAFTI City” over a decade and at a cost of about S\$900 million.²⁹ He said: “Singapore has finite land and we are building new training facilities overseas. ... But at the same time, we must have world-class training facilities in Singapore itself. We must guard against over-dependence on overseas training grounds. It is not possible for all our NSmen to only train overseas as the bulk of our training is still conducted locally, especially for our Army.”³⁰ The media summarized: “Noting that modern warfare and

²⁶ “President Trump welcomes PM Lee to White House for Oval Office meeting, working luncheon”, *Today* (Singapore), 24 October 2017.

²⁷ “Modest increase for Singapore’s 2017 defence budget”, *Jane’s 360*, 21 February 2017.

²⁸ “New SAF unit to battle cyber threats”, *Today*, 3 March 2017. See also “Defending a borderless frontier”, *Pioneer*, May 2017, pp.20-21 and “Singapore strengthens cyber defence with new organization”, *Straits Times*, 4 March 2017.

²⁹ “SAFTI City ‘the size of Bishan’ to be built for army training”, *Channel News Asia*, 3 March 2017. See also “Battle City”, *Pioneer*, April 2017, pp.20-21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

peacekeeping missions alike are now much more likely to take place in built-up cities instead, Dr Ng said: ‘The new SAFTI City will allow any battalion to fight across different terrains successively as they will do in real-life missions. It will therefore have both urban and conventional terrain. In the urban setting, there will be low houses and high-rise buildings. In the open terrain - jungles, hills and rivers to cross’. ... ‘But the signature change will be that state-of-the-art training simulation technologies will be designed into new physical facilities to replicate distinct operating environments.’³¹

Singapore has to cope with the spectre of terrorism too.³² According to Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs, close to 80 citizens have been detained under the Internal Security Act for terrorism-related activities since 2002. This problem has not abated despite Islamic State (IS) losses in the Middle East and the defeat of IS-linked militants in Marawi in the Philippines.³³ The city-state officially launched an Island Defence Training Institute (IDTI) in July 2017 to equip soldiers with skills to respond to terrorist threats alongside the police in urban environments such as shopping malls and housing estates. The IDTI plans to train up to 33,000 active and operationally ready national servicemen a year at its peak.³⁴

Dealing with Terrorism Abroad: SAF Deployment

Besides the deployment of a medical support team to Iraq, the SAF also dispatched troops to provide intelligence analysis support to the US Central Command and Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF). These SAF soldiers were deployed in Qatar and Kuwait. The SAF also deployed a KC-135 R tanker aircraft to support air-to-air refuelling operations for coalition aircraft.³⁵ A RSAF C-130 transport aircraft also delivered humanitarian aid to thousands of refugees who fled from ISIS-affiliated groups which captured Marawi in Muslim Mindanao in the Southern Philippines. Singapore also offered drones to enhance the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP)’s intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities and the SAF’s

³¹ Ibid.

³² See “Terror threat to Singapore at highest level in recent years”, *Straits Times*, 2 June 2017.

³³ “Anti-terror efforts to continue as threats remain at ‘a high level’: Shanmugam”, *Channel News Asia*, 17 December 2017.

³⁴ “Soldiers to be equipped with anti-terror skills”, *Straits Times*, 1 August 2017. See also “SAF beefing up land, air, sea operations to tackle terrorism”, *Straits Times*, 1 July 2017.

³⁵ See “75 SAF soldiers lauded for serving in fight against ISIS”, *Straits Times*, 10 October 2017.

urban warfare training facilities to aid Filipino troops to rid Muslim militants in Marawi.³⁶

Epilogue

2017 was indeed a challenging year for Singapore to walk the strategic tightrope in East Asia. Though a small state, it did not “kow-tow” to Chinese pressure and displeasure. The SAF also played an active international role to address the problems of terrorism in the Middle East and Mindanao. The city-state also anticipated potential problems like terrorism at home and cyberattacks from abroad by launching new organizations like the IDTI and the Defence Cyber Organization. Simply put, Singapore is a small state but it certainly does not behave like a typical one.

³⁶ See “SAF sends humanitarian aid to Philippines”, *Pioneer*, September 2017, p.8 and “SAF to deliver humanitarian aid to Marawi evacuees”, *Sunday Times* (Singapore), 6 August 2017. See also “Philippine soldiers ‘capture’ buildings in exercise with SAF”, *Straits Times*, 14 December 2017.