

CHAPTER 6

Singapore's Security Outlook 2014: Readiness amidst Strategic Uncertainty

Lam Peng Er

An uncertain strategic environment: “Over the horizon” preparation

Singapore's security outlook is very consistent and does not lurch in different directions from year to year. In this regard, there was no significant change in the city-state's 2014 strategic outlook, but it did adopt new initiatives to meet perennial and new challenges (which included non-conventional threats). These include the decision in 2014 to dispatch Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) personnel abroad in cooperation with like-minded countries to contain ISIS (Islamic State) and the proposal to host a regional HADR (humanitarian assistance and disaster relief) coordination center in Singapore to complement existing frameworks such as the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Center to strengthen the existing regional crisis architecture.

In April 2014, at the ASEAN-US Defense Ministers' informal meeting, Singapore proposed that the Changi Command and Control (C2) Center would host a regional HADR coordination center¹. In December the same year, the city-state announced that the SAF would be sending between 50 and 60 personnel to take part in the multinational coalition efforts to combat the terrorist threat from ISIS in Iraq and Syria². SAF troops will not participate in combat operations but will be deployed to the US Central Command and the Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters spearheading the campaign in Iraq and Syria. Apparently, the SAF will also deploy a Boeing KC-135R Stratotanker for air-to-air refueling as well as an imagery analysis team³.

Not all of Singapore's security threats, actual or potential, emanate from abroad. A few Muslim Singaporeans who planned to join ISIS in the Middle East were

¹ MINDEF, “Singapore offers to host Regional HADR coordination center,” 4 April 2014.

² “SAF to send 50-60 personnel to combat ISIS threat: Ng Eng Hen,” *Channel News Asia*, 1 December 2014.

³ “Singapore to join coalition against Islamic State,” *AFP*, 3 November 2014.

arrested in 2014. Apparently, a few Singaporeans are among around 350 Southeast Asians (including Malaysians and Indonesians) who have joined the jihad in the Middle East. Teo Chee Hean, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, remarked in parliament in July 2014: “The conflict in Syria is into its third year. It is a security concern for many countries, including Singapore. [...] The Government knows of a handful of Singaporeans who have gone to Syria to take part in the conflict. [...] Several Singaporeans intended to travel to Syria or other conflict zones to engage in the jihadist violence there, but were detected before they could proceed with their plans. [...] Indeed, any Singaporean who assists violent organizations like the Al-Nusra Front, IS or any other violent group, has demonstrated a dangerous tendency to support, or resort to, violence to pursue a political or ideological cause. They would thus pose a real threat to Singapore’s national security⁴.”

2014 Outlook: Weapon systems for 2030

At the Singapore-hosted Shangri La Dialogue 2014, Dr. Ng Eng Hen, Minister of Defense of the city-state said: “Asia does not have the equivalent of the ‘never again’ resolve that bound all of Europe after two world wars, and that translated into political will to create formal structures and alliances to avoid war, to eliminate [...] the concept of war in Europe⁵.” Dr. Ng continued: “Instead, Asian countries only share a common instinct for independence desperately fought. On that score Asian countries are still relatively young, beginning with Vietnam gaining independence in 1945, Singapore gained independence in 1965 [...] the civil and social institutions are still evolving inchoate. Some countries in Asia are not traditional democracies. Unlike Europe, there is no binding aversion to regional conflict⁶.”

Notwithstanding the formation of an ASEAN Community in 2015 and the existence of various ASEAN-centric multilateral organizations and processes like the ARF, APT, EAS and ADMM Plus, Singapore is cognizant of the uncertain power transition in East Asia, and that peace in Asia is relatively fragile compared to Western Europe. Indeed, East Asian states do not share common institutions, values, identity and a “never again” mentality towards war.

⁴ Ministry of Home Affairs, “Oral reply to parliamentary question on Syrian conflict,” 9 July 2014.

⁵ Dr. Ng Eng Hen, “Ensuring agile conflict management in the Asia-Pacific,” Shangri-La Dialogue 2014 Fifth Plenary Session. Publication date: 1 June 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

With the mindset of a vulnerable small state in an uncertain strategic environment, Singapore has always been a relatively big spender on defense as an insurance for its survival and independence. In March 2014, Singapore's Ministry of Defense disclosed that the total expenditure of MINDEF in FY2014 was projected to be 12.57 billion SGD (10.05 billion USD), an increase of 391 million SGD (313 million USD) or 3.2% from the revised FY2013 expenditure⁷.

To justify such considerable defense budget for a small state, Defense Minister Ng explained in parliament in March 2014:

It is not possible to predict the future precisely or tailor-make an SAF that meets only specific security challenges. I think all of us know that because if you look at within the last decade [...] all the major security challenges globally, whether was it 9/11, the terrorist threat, SARS and piracy, all came as surprises. No one foresaw us operating a Weapon Locating Radar and UAVs and running hospitals 6,000 km away in Oruzgan, in Afghanistan, or deploying frigates and naval helicopters more than 7,000 km away in the Gulf of Aden. This is not a surprise because military history is replete with unknown unknowns. Because we are unable to forecast specific security threats, we therefore must adopt a more robust and resilient approach by building an SAF that can deter would-be aggressors and meet a wide range of security threats so that we would not be caught off-guard or flat-footed⁸.

Defense Minister Ng then envisaged that the SAF in 2030 "will be one with all parts highly connected. Which [sic] means that whether it's the fighter pilot in the air, the sailor out on the oceans or the soldier on land, each will be able to see the big picture, and beyond that, speak to each other to jointly target threats and orchestrate responses [...] This concept of a networked force is now a reality, and the SAF is a front-runner in global terms in realizing the full potential of a networked military⁹."

Ng also anticipated and disclosed the following weapon systems for the SAF by 2030 in parliament:

- F-16s upgraded with the Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radars (which can see further and will have more precise air-to-ground munitions).
- Multi-layered air defense capabilities with the deployment of the SPYDER and

⁷ MINDEF, "FY2014 expenditure estimates," 2014. <[www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/.../budget_2014/.../25%20MINDEF%2020...>](http://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/.../budget_2014/.../25%20MINDEF%2020...) (Accessed: 6 January 2014).

⁸ MINDEF, "Speech by Dr. Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Defence, at Committee of Supply Debate 2014," 6 March 2014.

⁹ Ibid.

ASTER-30 Surface-to-Air Missile Systems.

- Current KC-135 aerial tankers replaced by the Airbus A330 Multi-Role Tanker Transport (MRTT), which will extend the range of Singapore's fighters through Air-to-Air Refueling. The Airbus A330 will double up as a cargo and troop-lift aircraft to deploy troops and equipment to overseas sites further away for HADR operations.
- Two Type-218SG submarines in operation, together with two Archer-class submarines.
- Frigates, operating with their Sikorsky S-70B Naval Helicopters, and new Littoral Mission Vessels, will form the mainstay of the SAF's surface fleet.
- Possibly larger LSTs (Landing Ship Tanks) that carry more helicopters and cargo.
- More mobile Army in 2030: In the next 10 years, the number of units operating on wheel or track platforms will almost double including more Terrex Infantry Fighting Vehicles, to deal with threats in urban environments. (These Terrexes will be linked to UAVs to see further, better and act more decisively).
- The Bionixes will be upgraded and operationalized by 2030.

Dr. Ng continued: "By 2030, the SAF also expects that future systems that are currently prototyped or thought about will be part of our day to day use. Possibilities include multiple micro-UAVs for individual soldiers. [...] Very likely that individual soldiers will be able to use them or even robotic mules that can carry very heavy loads and follow soldiers autonomously. [...] We will continue to test these capabilities in realistic terrain and scenarios¹⁰." Defense Minister Ng noted that by 2030 Singapore would have acquired its next generation fighter. Though he did not mention the name of its next generation fighter, it is probably the Lockheed Martin F-35B Lightning IIs¹¹.

In October 2014, Defense Minister Ng announced that a giant helium-filled balloon would float above Singapore from early 2015 to watch over the island's skies and shores round the clock. The media explained: "Known as an aerostat, the balloon will be tethered to the ground and house a surveillance radar that can spot hostile aerial and sea threats from as far as 200km away. These include straying civilian

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Carl Thayer, "Why Singapore wants the F-35," *The Diplomat*, 10 March 2014.

light aircraft, small boats and even mobile missile launchers. [...] the aerostat will complement Singapore's existing early warning and information-gathering systems that are facing increasing constraints, due mainly to the construction of taller buildings that prevent them "from establishing a clear line of sight¹²."

Navigating among Rivaling Great Powers: China, the US and India

While boosting its military deterrence, Singapore relies on diplomacy as its first line of defense. Simply put, the city state's grand strategy is to maintain close security relations with the US superpower while seeking closer economic cooperation with a rising China. In July 2014, Singapore and China announced that they are: "exploring the possibility of a third government-to-government project after the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP) and the Tianjin Eco-city¹³." The media noted: "Both sides will conduct exploratory studies, including visits to the cities being considered — expected to be either Chongqing, Chengdu or Xi'an. He added that the project must fit in with China's development priorities for its western region and break new ground for bilateral cooperation between the two countries. It must also be commercially viable¹⁴."

In November 2014, The SAF and the PLA took part in their third bilateral training exercise named *Cooperation 2014* in Nanjing, China. According to the media: "About 70 personnel each from the SAF and the PLA are taking part in the eight-day exercise which will include professional seminars and a company-level conventional infantry exercise featuring a live-firing demonstration. The SAF is represented by personnel from the 5th Singapore Infantry Regiment and 3rd Singapore Division. They will take part in the exercise alongside their Chinese counterparts from the PLA 179th Brigade and Nanjing Military Region¹⁵."

While establishing closer economic and defense ties with China, the city-state continues to unflaggingly support the US military and economic presence in East Asia to enhance the regional balance of power. Besides offering berthing facilities to

¹² "Lift-off for balloon radar to watch over Singapore," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 28 October 2014.

¹³ "Singapore, China looking at a third possible project," *Straits Times*, 29 July 2014.

¹⁴ "Singapore seeks to complete study into third project with China by 2015," *Today* (Singapore), 28 October 2014.

¹⁵ "SAF and People's Liberation Army carry out bilateral exercise in Nanjing," *Straits Times*, 2 November 2014.

visiting US air craft carrier fleets at its Changi Naval Base, Singapore is also hosting the littoral combat ships of the US navy. In December 2014, the USS Fort Worth, a littoral combat ship, arrived in Singapore to begin a 15 month deployment in the Asia-Pacific. This ship will replace the USS Freedom, the first of four LCS that Singapore permits to operate in its waters¹⁶.

The close defense ties between Singapore and the US is underscored by their air-land integrated live-firing exercise, *Exercise Daring Warrior*, held at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in November 2014. MINDEF noted: “About 340 personnel from the SAF are participating in the exercise, which involves assets such as the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) from the Singapore Army and Apache AH-64D attack helicopters from the Republic of Singapore Air Force. This is the fourth year that the SAF is conducting Exercise Daring Warrior in the USA. During the exercise, the SAF and the US Army conducted a bilateral air-land integrated live-firing exercise, which saw the involvement of 120 troops from the Oklahoma Army Reserve National Guard, 1-14th Field Artillery Regiment and 3-13th Field Artillery Regiment¹⁷.” MINDEF continued: “Training in the US allows the SAF to hone its capabilities and strengthen its operational readiness. It also provides an excellent opportunity for professional exchanges between the two armed forces and underscores the excellent and long-standing defense relationship between Singapore and the US¹⁸.”

Singapore also perceives that the success of the Trans Pacific Partnership talks is crucial for the US to be anchored economically in East Asia. In a dialogue hosted by the US think tank, Council on Foreign Relations, in Washington, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reiterated the importance of the TPP in underpinning the US rebalancing towards Asia. Lee opined that Asia “is changing, China is growing, developing, becoming more influential and will become more so by the day [...] It is a region where things are moving and which America is part of and has to engage in actively” and hoped that the TPP, a “serious measure which shows the seriousness” of Washington’s engagement with Asia, remains on the US agenda¹⁹.

¹⁶ “USS Fort Worth arrives in Singapore, to support US rebalance to Asia-Pacific,” *Straits Times*, 29 December 2014.

¹⁷ MINDEF, “The SAF Conducts Air-Land Integrated Live-Firing Exercise in Oklahoma,” 20 November 2014.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “TPP is vital to US involvement in Asia: Prime Minister Lee,” *Straits Times*, 25 June 2014.

Besides maintaining good ties with both the US and China, Singapore also seeks good relations with India, a regional great power. Singapore and the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh are partners in forging a master plan and developing the state's new capital city. Under their MOU signed in December 2014, Singapore will prepare the master plan for the city and its surroundings, starting with the construction of the first 8 square km section by a Singapore master developer and various Andhra Pradesh state departments. The Centre for Liveable Cities and Singapore Cooperation Enterprise will also help Andhra Pradesh by training state government officials who will be involved in the development of the capital city²⁰.

Between “difficult” neighbors: Malaysia and Indonesia

Malaysia

Singapore's relations with Malaysia and Indonesia are potentially “thorny” despite being fellow ASEAN members seeking to forge a regional community in 2015. The city-state's relations with Malaysia have been occasionally rocky since its separation in 1965 from its bigger neighbor in the North. To be sure, Singapore and Malaysia are part of the Five Power Defense Arrangements with the UK, Australia and New Zealand. The two Southeast Asian neighbors also cooperate in fighting trans-border crime and piracy. But both countries have had prickly relations due to their burden of history (after an acrimonious separation), competing sets of national ideologies (ethnic equality and meritocracy in Singapore versus Malay political dominance and affirmative action for Malay majority), poor personal relations between former Prime Ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamad, and occasional threats from the North to cut off the sale of water from Malaysia to Singapore (guaranteed by a bilateral treaty lodged with the UN).

However, bilateral ties have improved in recent years due to a new generation of political leaders in Singapore and Malaysia who opted for a win-win approach in bilateral ties. Their bilateral cooperation has resulted in the return to Singapore of land previously owned by Malaysia's KTM railway and the city-state's cooperation in the Iskandar project in the state of Johor, Malaysia. Both sides have also agreed to build a rapid train that will reduce traveling time between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur from five hours by car to 90 minutes by rail. Though the completion date of

²⁰ “Singapore to help develop new capital city of south India's Andhra Pradesh,” *Straits Times*, 8 December 2014.

2020 appears overly optimistic, it is already a done deal. International consortiums, including those from China and Japan, are interested in this project. Apparently, a Japanese consortium comprising of the East Japan Railway Company (JR-East), Sumitomo Corporation, Hitachi and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries is offering Japan's bullet-train system to Singapore and Malaysia.

Singapore demonstrated good neighborliness when it assisted Malaysia after its passenger plane MH370 mysteriously disappeared in March 2014. MINDEF subsequently announced: "Following the Malaysian authorities' announcement [...] that the Search-and-Locate (SAL) operation in the South China Sea has been called off, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has ceased its search efforts there as well. Since 8 March 2014, the SAF has supported the SAL operation in the South China Sea with C-130 aircraft, a Formidable-class frigate (RSS Steadfast) with a Sikorsky S-70B naval helicopter on board, a Victory-class missile corvette (RSS Vigour) as well as a submarine support and rescue vessel with divers on board. [...] The SAF will continue to support the SAL operation in the Malacca Strait with the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) Fokker-50 Maritime Patrol Aircraft (F-50 MPA) which was deployed to Butterworth Air Base, Malaysia. The SAF stands ready to provide further assistance to Malaysia in support of the SAL efforts²¹."

Indonesia

In February 2014, old scars with Indonesia were reopened when TNI named a newly refurbished naval craft after two Indonesian marines who were hanged by Singapore for detonating a bomb which killed civilians during the Indonesian confrontation against Malaysia. (Singapore was a state in the Federation of Malaysia then). Many Singaporeans were outraged when Indonesia named a newly refurbished navy frigate "*Usman Harun*" in honor of the two marines. The city-state has banned the frigate from Singaporean ports and naval bases. To Indonesia, the two marines

²¹ MINDEF, "SAF pulls out of search for MH370 in the South China Sea," 15 March 2014.

were martyrs; to Singapore, they were terrorists²². Deeply offended, Singapore sent a formal diplomatic note to Jakarta to register its regret.

Subsequently, Indonesia's top military brass canceled their visit to the Singapore Airshow held in February 2014. In the following month, Singapore withdrew from the Jakarta International Defense Dialogue when two Indonesian marines masqueraded as Usman and Harun (the two hanged marines) to pose at the event.

Singapore is likely to revise its history textbooks to highlight Indonesia's confrontation against Malaysia (and Singapore), and to hold commemorative events of the Indonesian marines' deadly sabotages with the aim of educating the younger generation of Singaporeans that security threats to Singapore did and will continue to exist. The Singapore historical narrative is that national defense and benign neighbors cannot be taken for granted.

This low point in Singapore-Indonesia relations is unfortunate, especially when 2014 marked the 10th anniversary of 2004 tsunami off the coast of Aceh resulting in the deaths of around 160,000 people. In December 2014, Second Minister for Defense Chan Chun Sing represented Singapore at the Aceh Tsunami Commemoration Event marking the 10th Anniversary of the 2004 tsunami. MINDEF noted Singapore's assistance to Indonesia: "About 1,200 SAF personnel were involved in the disaster relief efforts from 28 December 2004 to 25 February 2005 in Indonesia. During that time, the Republic of Singapore Navy sent more than 150 pallets and crates of relief supplies and equipment to the affected areas, while the Republic of Singapore

²² On Indonesia's war of terror against Singapore, the following Wikipedia entry is useful: "During the Indonesian *Konfrontasi* where Indonesia openly opposed the formation of Malaysia, Indonesian saboteurs mounted a campaign of terror in Singapore. They were trained to attack military installations and public utilities. However, when the saboteurs failed in their attempts to attack these installations that were heavily guarded, they set off bombs indiscriminately to create panic and disrupt life on the island. [...] By March 1965, a total of 29 bombs had been set off in Singapore. The 10 March 1965 bombing of the MacDonald House was the most serious of the spate of bombings in Singapore, when a bomb exploded at 3:07pm at the 10-storey building. The bomb killed three people, two were employees of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Elizabeth Suzie Choo, 36, a secretary and Juliet Goh, 23, a clerk. The third victim, Mohammed Yasin Kesit, 45, a driver, slipped into a coma after the blast, and did not come out of it. Thirty-three other people were injured. At the time of the bombing, the building had also housed the Australian High Commission and the Japanese Consulate. Within four days, Singaporean police arrested two Indonesian marines, Harun Said (then 21) and Osman Mohamed Ali (then 23) for the bombing. The two saboteurs had arrived in Singapore from Java at 11am on that fateful day, wearing civilian clothes. They had been instructed to bomb an electric power house but instead headed to MacDonald House. As they were in civilian clothes and had targeted a civilian building, the men were tried in Singapore for the murder of the three people who died in the blast. They were convicted of murder and hanged in 1968." See Wikipedia, "MacDonald House Bombing." <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacDonald_House_bombing> (Accessed: 7 January 2014).

Air Force transported about 500 tons of supplies and equipment²³.” The same article continued: “Following the disaster relief efforts, the Singapore Government, together with Non-Governmental Organizations and fellow Singaporeans, contributed in various reconstruction projects in Aceh such as the reconstruction of the pier at Meulaboh, a town on the west coast of Aceh, and the refurbishment of the Meulaboh General Hospital²⁴.”

On 28 December 2014, an Indonesian Air Asia aircraft flying from Surabaya to Singapore was lost over the Java Sea. MINDEF immediately declared: “The Republic of Singapore Air Force has placed two C-130 aircraft on standby to assist in the search and locate operation. The Singapore Armed Forces stands ready to commit more assets if required for the operation²⁵.” During the search and locate operation, Singapore discovered that the offensively-named navy frigate *Usman Harun* was also deployed there. Despite Singapore’s abhorrence of the frigate, it did not kick up a fuss because of the priority of the search and operation.

Conclusion

Singaporeans are very proud of their country’s moniker “the little red dot,” derogatorily labeled by then Indonesian President Habibie. As an affluent but small state, Singapore is always very conscious of its vulnerability amidst the power transition in East Asia, and that great powers and immediate neighbors may not necessarily always be friendly, considerate or grateful. Singapore’s strategic outlook for 2014 and beyond appears immutable. The city-state will support the UN and the rule of international law, ASEAN and multilateralism in East Asia, will assist the international community in anti-piracy and anti-terrorist cooperation in the Gulf region, will provide humanitarian and disaster relief to its neighbors (in Southeast Asia, China and Japan), will cultivate good relations with all great powers and will facilitate a balance of power in East Asia. It is also very “hard-nosed:” when push comes to shove, it must rely on its own diplomatic wit and formidable military deterrence, and not on systems of formal alliances or the charity of its neighbors for its independence, survival and well-being.

²³ “Mr Chan joins in Aceh Tsunami remembrance,” *Pioneer*, 26 December 2014.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ MINDEF, “Singapore Armed Forces Prepared to Assist in Search and Locate Operation,” 28 December 2014.