

CHAPTER 6

Singapore's Strategic Outlook in 2015: Golden Jubilee Year & Challenges Ahead

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Three significant domestic events

In 2015, there were three major events in Singapore which reinforced its prevailing geo-strategic outlook and national narrative of resilience amidst vulnerability. The first domestic event was the demise of the city-state's Founding Father, Lee Kuan Yew, in March that year and the week-long national mourning which reminded Singaporeans of his realist world view and ideology that Singapore, a small and vulnerable state sandwiched between bigger and potentially unfriendly neighbours, must be strong, resilient and successful to ensure national survival, independence and prosperity.

The second was the city-state's joyous Golden Jubilee celebrations in August which reiterated the hubristic "Singapore Story" of making it despite geopolitical and economic challenges and acute vulnerability. The third significant event was the September General Election in which the People's Action Party (PAP), the perennial party-in-power, arrested its electoral decline since the 2006 and 2011 general elections and captured 69.9 percent of the popular votes and 83 out of 89 seats in parliament.

The resurgence of PAP one-party dominance, with no alternation of political parties in power, means that the Singapore state is able to adopt the same consistent strategic outlook of realism in international affairs. As explained earlier, Singapore's "mentality of realism" is that it must be strong, tough and pragmatic to survive and thrive in a treacherous geo-political world. That the same political party has been in power since 1959 and now led by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the son of Lee Kuan Yew, means profound continuity in the city-state's world view and ideology.

Defence budget and weapon acquisitions

Coloured by the view that it is small and vulnerable in a turbulent world, the affluent city-state has assiduously pursued good relations with all great powers and consistently channelled considerable resources to bolster its military defence. Singapore's defence budget increased by 5.7 percent in nominal terms to US\$9.5 billion (S\$13.12 billion) for fiscal year (FY) 2015. The country's defence expenditure as a proportion of GDP rose from 3.2 percent of GDP in 2014 to 3.3 percent for 2015.¹ Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen explained in parliament in March 2015: "Our approach is to plan long-term and maintain defence expenditures steadily". In the same speech, Ng also emphasized that Singapore's Armed Forces (SAF) needs "to re-make itself in response to a changing landscape from new security threats, such a hybrid warfare, by stepping up investments in cyber defences, unnamed aerial vehicles, information technology, robotics, and artificial intelligence".²

In 2015, Singapore's navy, army and air force obtained new weapon systems. The navy will replace its *Fearless*-class patrol vessels with eight new locally-built littoral mission vessels (LMV).³ The first littoral ship *Independence* was launched in July 2015 and all eight LMVs are anticipated to be fully operational by 2020. Earlier, the navy has ordered two new Type 218SG attack submarines from ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems, the first of which will be delivered by 2020. In the same year, Defence Minister Ng commissioned new armoured vehicles at a ceremony to replace the army's old V200.⁴ These new Peacekeeper Protected Response Vehicles (PRV) were jointly developed by the army and the Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA). Moreover, the air force will replace its fleet of Super Puma helicopters over the next decade. In 2014, the air force also ordered six A330 tanker aircraft from Spain. Singapore has purchased 32 F-15E combat aircraft from the US and will upgrade its fleet of 63 F-16 Fighting Falcons.⁵

¹ "Singapore's Defence Budget climbs 5.7 percent", *Diplomat*, 19 March 2015. See also MINDEF, "Singapore Budget 2015" <https://www.google.com.sg/search?q=singapore+defe&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws_rd=cr&ei=9wxYVpHPAo2tuQSziJ7oDw#q=singapore+defence+budget+2015> (Accessed: 27 November 2015).

² "Singapore's Defence Budget climbs 5.7 percent", *Diplomat*, 19 March 2015.

³ "What Do We Know About Singapore's New Warship?: The littoral mission vessel is smarter, faster and sharper than its predecessor", *Diplomat*, 7 July 2015.

⁴ "The Singapore Military's New Armoured Vehicle: The city-state commissions The Peacekeeper", *Diplomat*, 9 July 2015.

⁵ "Lockheed Martin wins contract for upgrade of Singapore F-16s", *Reuters*, 1 December 2015.

Strategic cooperation with great powers

United States

Amidst China's rise and the power transition in East Asia, Singapore believes that the US security presence is indispensable to the regional balance of power.⁶ The city-state has consistently supported a US presence spanning the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. Indeed, this is a key contribution of Singapore to regional stability. In December 2015, Defence Minister Ng and US Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter signed an enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and the 10th anniversary of the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) between the US and Singapore.⁷ Ng expressed his appreciation for American support for the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) training detachments in the US while Carter thanked Singapore for the logistical support that it provides to US military aircraft and vessels in the region under the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA).

Ng and Carter noted the successful deployment of the second Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), the *USS Fort Worth*, which was deployed to Singapore in December 2014. The US plans to deploy up to four LCS concurrently in the region by end 2017.⁸ Permitting the four LCS to operate out from Singapore can be interpreted as the city-state's efforts to facilitate the US' "rebalancing" or "pivot back to Asia".

Of significance was the inaugural deployment of the US P-8 Poseidon aircraft to Singapore in December 2015 under the framework of the 1990 MOU and 2005 SFA. The US Navy has already sent the P-8 Poseidon on overflights in the South China Sea. Although the ostensible reason for the P-8 Poseidon's deployment from Singapore is to promote greater interoperability with regional militaries through participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises and providing timely support for regional HADR (Humanitarian and Disaster Relief operations), its obvious role is the monitoring of Chinese maritime activities given the latter's assertiveness in the disputed South China Sea and massive reclamation of artificial islands.⁹ Presumably,

⁶ "US presence in Asia-Pacific is essential for regional stability: Dr Ng Eng Hen", *Channel News Asia*, 10 December 2015.

⁷ "US, Singapore sign enhanced defence cooperation", *Channel News Asia*, 8 December 2015.

⁸ "US to base four warships in Singapore as China flexes military muscles", *Guardian*, 18 February 2015.

⁹ "US to deploy spy plane in Singapore amid China tensions", *Reuters*, 8 December 2015.

the deployment of the US P-8 Poseidon may be annoying and of concern to China, but thus far the Chinese have yet to openly criticize Singapore for the deployment of the US P-8 Poseidon from the city-state.

China

Singapore walks the strategic tightrope by maintaining excellent ties with both the US and China. The city-state has extensive economic and political ties with the Chinese Mainland, and in recent years their bilateral relations have also extended to security cooperation. In May 2015, Singapore's navy and the China's People's Liberation Army Navy concluded a new joint naval exercise hailed as a "milestone" in their bilateral defence relationship by Singapore's Ministry of Defence (MINDEF).¹⁰ The inaugural four-day Exercise Maritime Cooperation involved the Singapore navy's *RSS Intrepid* frigate and *RSS Valiant* missile corvette, as well as China's *Yulin* frigate. According to MINDEF, the exercise involved conventional naval warfare exercises such as gunnery firings and manoeuvring drills.

In August 2015, Singapore took over from Thailand to be the country coordinator for ASEAN-China relations for the next three years. Besides upgrading the China-ASEAN FTA implemented in 2010, Singapore also hopes that a Code of Conduct can be signed by the regional states to peacefully manage the South China Sea dispute. Indeed, this is a difficult and delicate task because of overlapping sovereignty claims by six parties (China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei). The city-state desires ASEAN-China relations to enhance their multilateral cooperation and that comprehensive ties should and must not be overshadowed by a single maritime dispute.

Chinese President Xi Jinping made a two day official state visit to Singapore in November 2015. Xi's visit marked the 25th anniversary of the establishment of formal relations between the two countries. China and Singapore then officially announced that their third government-to-government (G-to-G) project will be the city-state's contribution to make the city of Chongqing a connectivity hub. This third project follows the earlier two G-to-G cooperation known as the Suzhou Industrial Project and the Singapore-Tianjin Eco-City.

¹⁰ "Singapore, China complete inaugural bilateral naval exercise", *Channel News Asia*, 25 May 2015.

The media reported: "A city of 30 million, Chongqing is one of four municipalities under the direct control of China's central government. the south-western city has set aside an area of 20 sq. km for the collaboration, with the Longsheng district of about 10 sq. km designated the core area. The initiatives planned for the project include an integrated logistics centre comprising an aviation and port logistics hub; a China-Singapore modern services demonstration zone where Singapore firms can provide legal and accounting services among others; and a smart city featuring a special administrative zone for cloud computing and big data sectors".¹¹

During Xi's state visit, Singapore was a neutral venue for the historical meeting between Xi and Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou. This was the first meeting between the top leaders of both sides of the Taiwan Straits in more than 60 years. Obviously, Singapore welcomes peace between Beijing and Taipei, a condition which is conducive to stability in East Asia.

India

Singapore and India have long-standing defence ties such as joint military training and exercises (including an annual anti-submarine warfare exercise), defence technology cooperation and other professional exchanges between the two countries.¹² In November 2015, both countries signed a revised defence cooperation agreement which includes the holding of regular defence ministers' dialogues and cooperation between their defence industries. New Delhi and Singapore also agreed to enhance bilateral training and exercises between their militaries and explore further cooperation in areas of common interest such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Earlier in 2012, both governments renewed an agreement to allow Singapore's air force to continue joint military training at Kalaikunda Air Force Station for five more years.

A case can be made that both countries have a "special relationship" as evidenced by India's kind consideration for Singapore when Lee Kuan Yew passed away. India observed a day of national mourning for Lee Kuan Yew with its flag flown at half-mast nation-wide.¹³ In November 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Singapore to mark the 50th anniversary of bilateral ties. The media reported:

¹¹ "Third Singapore-China joint project to be based in Chongqing", *Straits Times*, 6 November 2015.

¹² "Revised defence pact "further strengthens Singapore-India ties"", *Straits Times*, 25 November 2015.

¹³ "India declares a day of national mourning on Sunday for Mr Lee Kuan Yew", *Straits Times*, 27 March 2015.

“To mark this occasion, Singapore and India will elevate relations by signing the Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration. The declaration outlines the two countries’ interest in expanding cooperation in key areas like smart cities and urban solutions, skills development, connectivity and economic cooperation. This will build on Singapore’s contributions to India in these areas, which include the master-planning of Amaravati - the new capital city of Andhra Pradesh - and support of the Centre of Excellence in Tourism Training in Udaipur, Rajasthan”.¹⁴ Singapore’s relations with India are very friendly and comprehensive indeed.

Non-conventional threats: Singapore’s responses

There are at least three serious non-conventional threats faced by the Singaporean state and society: jihadist terrorism, piracy, and the poisonous smog from the indiscriminate burning of plantations and peat lands in Indonesia. In October 2015, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong singled out ISIS and terrorism as serious threats for Singapore and its Southeast Asian neighbours in terms of physical safety and racial harmony.¹⁵ Lee’s latest emphasis came nearly a year after Defence Minister Ng’s announcement in November 2014 that Singapore would join the US-led multinational coalition to fight ISIS. However, there would be no Singapore troops on the ground in Iraq and Syria. Instead, the city-state’s contribution would consist of non-combat hardware (including a tanker aircraft for air-to-air refuelling) and 50 to 60 personnel (including planning officers and an imagery analysis team) operating from neighbouring countries.¹⁶ That hundreds of volunteers from the Muslim-majoritarian countries of Malaysia and Indonesia (Singapore’s closest

¹⁴ “Indian Prime Minister Modi to visit Singapore”, *Channel News Asia*, 22 November 2015.

¹⁵ “What is Singapore doing to counter ISIS?”, *Straits Times*, 1 November 2015. Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean who is also the Coordinating Minister for Security said: (Attacks) can occur even in places where security is high. ... The terrorism threat is certainly something that is heightened in Singapore and has become more prominent over the last two years with ISIS. ... Not all of them are ISIS-related, but from our part of the world, we estimate that there’s somewhere between 700 to 1,000 persons who have gone to Syria and Iraq from our part of the world. Several hundreds, in the high hundreds from Indonesia, low hundreds from Malaysia, and a handful from Singapore and other places. They will return to our region, and that will cause a fairly major security concern for a number of years to come. Apart from that, we can see that ISIS has also internationalised their actions. So they’re not confined to Iraq and Syria, but have also carried out or inspired attacks in other parts of the world. So this has certainly heightened the threat from terrorism to us”. See “Security, economy, social cohesion among the main issues for Singapore in 2016: Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean”, *Channel News Asia*, 28 December 2015.

¹⁶ The media reported: “In response to a question from MP Alex Yam on how SAF will contribute to the coalition, Dr Ng said SAF’s contribution will be ‘within its means’ and ‘sustainable and useful’. This includes sending liaison and planning officers to the United States Central Command and the Combined Joint Task Force HQ, a KC-135R tanker aircraft for air-to-air refuelling, and an Imagery Analysis Team – assets that were previously deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.”.

neighbours) have joined ISIS in the Middle East and may return to Southeast Asia to spark jihadist mayhem is very troubling to Singaporeans. Though acts of planned and random terrorism may temporarily strike fear, chaos and paralysis in Singapore and its neighbours, jihadists are a tiny minority in these Southeast Asian countries and they do not have the capacity to overthrow governments and states in this region.

Being a great maritime port dependent on trade and the safety of navigation, Singapore takes the threat of piracy seriously. Besides its cooperation with littoral states to ensure maritime safety in the Straits of Malacca, Singapore has also engaged in anti-piracy measures in the Gulf of Aden. The media noted: "Since 2009, more than 700 sailors, soldiers and airmen have operated under the ambit of the multinational CTF 151 as part of the counter-piracy effort in the Gulf of Aden (GoA). This year, a task group comprising an RSN frigate and a naval helicopter was deployed to the GoA for the same mission under CTF 151".¹⁷

The annual burning of plantations and peatlands in Indonesia, which results in a horrific smog poisoning its own citizens in Sumatra and its ASEAN neighbours, is a source of great trepidation, exasperation, anger and grief in Singapore. It was ironic that though ASEAN was supposed to be an official community in December 2015, Indonesia showed a disregard if not a disdain for its long suffering neighbours. It was shocking to Singaporeans when Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla callously and arrogantly said that his country's neighbours should not complain and be grateful for eleven months of good air from Indonesia.¹⁸ Given its poor regulatory capacity and endemic corruption, Indonesia is unlikely to resolve this unconventional threat to its neighbours soon.

Notwithstanding Jakarta's lackadaisical attitude towards its own plantation and forest fires, which hurt its own citizens the most, Singapore deployed personnel and assets from the Singapore Army, and the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) to assist in fighting forest fires in Sumatra, Indonesia. The Singapore military was also accompanied by a six-man Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (DART), and equipment from the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF).¹⁹

¹⁷ MINDEF, "Overseas Operations", 16 March 2015.

¹⁸ See "Indonesia's Vice-President Jusuf Kalla criticises neighbours for grumbling about haze", *Straits Times*, 5 March 2015.

¹⁹ MINDEF, "HADR Deployments: Forest Fires in Sumatra, Indonesia", 16 March 2016.

Singapore also deployed its military abroad for human security missions in 2015. When forest fires raged in Chiangmai, Thailand in March 2015, the SAF and the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) assisted in putting out the blaze. The SAF's helicopters (equipped with a 5,000L water bucket from the SCDF), were dispatched for that fire-fighting mission. After a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal and killed thousands in April 2015, the SAF deployed C-130 aircraft to airlift the Singapore relief contingent and their equipment for rescue work in the affected area. Besides the SAF, Singapore's contingent also consisted of the Changi Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Coordination Centre advance team and members of the Singapore Civil Defence Force and Singapore Police Force.

Epilogue: Best of Times, Worst of Times

2015 ushered Singapore into the post-Lee Kuan Yew era. In a sense, it was the worst of times for many Singaporeans because they mourned for a stern, puritanical and authoritarian father figure who played a pivotal role in the city-state's success as a prosperous and sovereign entity in a turbulent region. It was also the worst of times when air quality in Singapore was hazardous due to the peat and plantation fires wilfully ignited in Indonesia. Paradoxically, it was the best of times because Singapore celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 2015. It was also the best of times because ASEAN officially became an economic community that year. If ASEAN succeeds, Singapore succeeds. But a dark spot in Singapore's geo-strategic horizon is the regional tension over the disputed South China Sea. Though not a claimant state, Singapore has a stake in the peaceful resolution of the dispute, the rule of the law of the sea and the freedom of navigation. It will probably trouble Singapore when ASEAN states, despite their evolution into an official community, are likely to split over the South China Sea dispute when great powers intervene on opposing sides.