

CHAPTER 6

Singapore's Security Outlook in 2016: High and Low Points

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Introduction

Paradoxically, 2016 was a year of high and low points for Singapore's diplomacy. Indeed, it was a "sweet and sour" year for its security outlook. Diplomatic relations with its immediate neighbors, Indonesia and Malaysia, reached a new high. In December 2016, the city-state signed a landmark agreement with Malaysia to build a rapid train line between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur within a decade.¹ This cooperative infrastructure development is very important both economically (by deepening interdependency) and symbolically (by shifting away from an occasional acrimonious relationship after Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965).²

The city-state's good relationship with Jakarta is evident by the Indonesian parliament's ratification of a sea border treaty with Singapore demarcating maritime boundaries in the eastern stretch of the Singapore Strait in December 2016.³ In recent years, bilateral ties between the city-state and its giant neighbor to the south have been bedeviled by the periodic smog which enveloped the island. This poisonous haze was due to Indonesian forest fires willfully ignited to clear the land for plantation agriculture. In this regard, the bilateral border treaty signifies a relationship on the mend.

Another high point for Singapore's security was the signing of a MOU (memorandum of understanding) with Canberra in October 2016 that will allow the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to deploy more troops and equipment, and develop more

¹ Hitherto, the driving time from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur averaged around five hours. The rapid train will slash travel time between the two stations in Singapore and the Malaysian capital to just 90 minutes. Conceivably, it will be a tremendous boost to cross border travel, tourism, and trade.

² The media noted: "Mr Lee (Hsien Loong) added that the HSR (High-Speed Rail) line will transform the way the two countries interact, socialise and do business, for the better. The HSR is a marquee project and the signing of the bilateral agreement marks a significant milestone in Singapore relations with Malaysia, he said." See "Singapore, Malaysia sign bilateral agreement for High-Speed Rail project," *Channel News Asia*, 13 December 2016.

³ "Indonesia ratifies sea border agreement with Singapore," *Channel News Asia*, 16 December 2016.

advanced military training facilities in Australia. There are at least two major benefits for Singapore. First, it has secured access to military training space in Australia about ten times its own size. Second, the Australian training ground will allow the SAF space to hone its more sophisticated warfighting capabilities.⁴ Under the MOU, the SAF can now deploy up to 2,400 military vehicles and 14,000 troops to Australia annually for training purposes over the next 25 years. The duration of training allowed has also been increased to up to 18 weeks per year.⁵ The city-state will invest up to AU\$2.25 billion (US\$1.7 billion) over the next decade to upgrade infrastructure in the Australian training areas. Singapore's Ministry of Defence said: "This will allow the SAF to meet its growing requirements for motorised and armoured live-firing training, as well as combined arms and joint training."⁶

Singapore's relations with the US superpower and Japan were also very good in 2016. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a state visit to the United States in July and August that year.⁷ In September 2016, Singapore President Tony Tan was in Japan on an official state visit.⁸ In contrast, the city-state's relations with China took a turn for the worse. Arguably, 2016 was a major turning point in Sino-Singapore relations. It appears that their so-called "special relationship" has been severely eroded and it is conceivable that a "new normal" of occasional spats looms ahead.

End of a "special relationship" with China?

On 23 November 2016, the Hong Kong Customs Authority seized nine Terrex armored vehicles belonging to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) in transit after its routine military exercises in Taiwan⁹ (The SAF has been conducting military exercises in Taiwan since 1975 due to Singapore's lack of training space). According to the Hong Kong media, this seizure and detention of the Terrex carriers at the Hong

⁴ "Singapore, Australia progress on agreement to expand defense training facilities," *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, 14 October 2016.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The media reported: "Mr Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama will host PM Lee and his wife to a state dinner, an honor accorded by the Obama administration to only 11 other occasions in eight years. Four of them were for Asian countries: India, China, South Korea and Japan." See "PM Lee's trip to the US is the first official visit by Singapore PM since 1985," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 30 July 2016.

⁸ "President Tony Tan on nine-day state visit to Japan from Monday, with stops in Tokyo, Kyoto and Miyagi," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 27 November 2016.

⁹ "Troop carriers seized: Is China sending Singapore a message?," CNN, 30 November 2016. See also "Terrex seizure: Singapore Government has made known 'formal position' to Hong Kong counterpart," *Today* (Singapore), 23 December 2016.

Kong port was made “following a tip-off from mainland law enforcers.”¹⁰ Despite representations from Singapore to secure the release of its Terrex vehicles, Hong Kong has not provided the legal basis and a proper explanation for its high-handed actions.

Shortly after the impounding of the Terrexes, a spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs raised the issue of the city-state's long running military exercises in Taiwan and stated Beijing's official objection for the first time: “I wish to reiterate that the Chinese government consistently and resolutely opposes any form of official exchanges, including military exchanges and cooperation, between countries with which we have diplomatic relations and the Taiwan region.”¹¹

In actuality, Beijing did not object to the SAF's military exercises in Taiwan when it established official diplomatic ties with Singapore in 1990.¹² Indeed, China has offered its Hainan Island as a substitute for Taiwan to the SAF on a few occasions but Singapore has declined the offer. This episode of detaining the SAF's Terrex armoured carriers can be interpreted as Beijing's attempt to “kill two birds with one stone”¹³ --- to further isolate Taiwan after its President Tsai Ing-wen refused to embrace the “One China Principle” by pressuring the SAF to quit Taiwan, and to reprimand Singapore for its independent stance in the South China Sea dispute and perceived strategic alignment with the United States.¹⁴

¹⁰ “Inside the Terrex military vehicle at the centre of Singapore-China storm,” *South China Morning Post*, 2 December 2016.

¹¹ “Beijing warns against Taiwan ties as Singapore tries to free troop carriers in Hong Kong,” *Reuters*, 25 November 2016.

¹² The *Far Eastern Economic Review* noted: “Beijing has offered Singapore the use of Hainan Island in southern China as an alternative training site, but the Singaporeans don't take the offer seriously. They say privately that their non-Chinese neighbors often suspect that Singapore is fronting for China, and to switch military training to the People's Republic would tend to confirm those fears.” See “A David-and-Goliath Tussle,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 5 August 2004.

¹³ “How Singapore's military vehicles became Beijing's diplomatic weapon,” *South China Morning Post*, 3 December 2016.

¹⁴ The United States and Singapore signed a new defence agreement in December 2015 that will provide a new framework for an expanded defence relationship between them. Indeed, their security ties are not new. The city-state has purchased sophisticated weapons from the US and the SAF conducts military exercises in the United States. The Diplomat noted: “Singapore and the United States already have a strong defence relationship. The city-state has provided logistical support for U.S. military aircraft and vessels in the region under the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA). Singapore stepped in to support an American military presence following the closure of U.S. bases in the Philippines in 1991, supported U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and was the first Southeast Asian state to join the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL.” See “US, Singapore Ink New Defence Pact,” *Diplomat*, 8 December 2015.

Reflecting on the Terrex Incident, Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said that its seizure was a “low point” for the city-state “from the defence perspective.”¹⁵ Subsequently, Ng elaborated in parliament that Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has asked Hong Kong Chief Executive CY Leung for the immediate return of the Terrex armoured vehicles. The media noted:

The legal position is that the SAF Terrexes and other equipment detained in Hong Kong are the property of the Singapore Government,’ he [Ng] explained. They are protected by sovereign immunity, even though they were being shipped by commercial carriers. This means that they are immune from any measures of constraint abroad. They cannot legally be detained or confiscated by other countries. This principle is well-established under international law, and we are advised by lawyers that it is also the law in the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region).¹⁶

The erosion of a “special relationship”¹⁷ between Beijing and Singapore, is in part, due to the departure of top leaders like paramount Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew who forged a good personal rapport, and the rise of a more assertive, confident and nationalistic China which needs Singapore much less today. This is in contrast to China’s early years of reform in the 1980s and 1990s when the city-state was seen as a “model” for the Mainland’s opening to the world and economic development after the period of Maoist autarky.¹⁸ The “new normal”¹⁹ in Sino-Singapore relations

¹⁵ “Terrex issue a low point in 2016, but issue mustn’t be allowed to dominate: Ng Eng Hen,” *Channel News Asia*, 30 December 2016.

¹⁶ See “PM Lee asked Hong Kong leader for immediate return of Terrexes: Ng Eng Hen,” *Channel News Asia*, 9 January 2017. The same report wrote: “Noting that the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) moves more than 700 military platforms using commercial carriers to all parts of the world each year, Dr Ng said: “Neither the SAF, Singapore, nor indeed most other countries operate on the assumption that our cargo will be arbitrarily seized when transiting reputable foreign ports.”

¹⁷ See, for example, John Wong and Teng Siow Song, “China’s special relationship with Singapore” in Wang Gungwu and John Wong (eds.), *Interpreting China’s Development* (Singapore: World Scientific Press, 2007) and Zheng Yongnian and Lim Wen Xin, “Lee Kuan Yew: The Special Relationship” in Zheng Yongnian and Lye Liang Fook (eds.), *Singapore-China Relations: 50 Years* (Singapore: World Scientific Press, 2016).

¹⁸ During his 1978 visit to Singapore, Deng was impressed and fascinated by the city-state’s remarkable economic development. Subsequently, Singapore was as a frame of reference for China’s economic reforms and market opening. Scholar Zheng Yongnian noted that Deng Xiaoping “spoke about Singapore during his landmark Southern Tour to Chinese cities in 1992: ‘There is good social order in Singapore. They govern the place with discipline. We should draw from their experience and do even better than them’. His comments soon unleashed a wave of Chinese study visits to Singapore.” Zheng Yongnian, “The special relationship with China,” *Today* (Singapore), 23 March 2015. See Stephan Ortmann and Mark R. Thompson, “China’s Obsession with Singapore: Learning Authoritarian Modernity,” *Pacific Review*, No. 27, May 2014, Stephan Ortmann and Mark R. Thompson, China and the “Singapore Model,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.27, No.1, January 2016 and Benjamin Ho, “Learning from Lee: Lessons in Governance for the Middle Kingdom from the Little Red Dot,” *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, Vol.33, No.2, June 2016.

¹⁹ Peh Shing Hwei, “The new normal of Singapore’s relations with China,” *Channel News Asia*, 6 October 2016.

is likely to hit occasional rough patches in the years ahead.

The “Chineseness” of Singapore can be a double-edged sword in bilateral relations with the Mainland Dragon. 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.” Koh elaborated:

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 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.²⁰

Arguably, the assertiveness, virulent nationalism and hubris of a rising China have become a problem for East Asia including Singapore. Though the world has transformed and globalized remarkably since the epoch when Dynastic China had its tributary system in East Asia, it appears that the Chinese Mainland today has not completely shed its Middle Kingdom mentality based on a hierarchy with itself at the apex. This sense of a hierarchy is based on historical precedent, its “superior” civilization of 5,000 years, enormous geographical size, possessing the largest population in the world, and emergence as a rising power, underpinned by its phenomenal economic growth.

An incident at the 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Hanoi illustrates the Chinese mentality of entitlement due to size and hierarchy when its Foreign Minister was enraged by the discussion on the South China Sea dispute. The media reported:

²⁰ Tommy Koh, “China’s perception of Singapore: 4 areas of misunderstanding,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), 21 October 2016. Bilahari Kausikan puts it more bluntly: “But Chinese leaders and officials, despite our repeatedly correcting them, persistently refer to Singapore as a ‘Chinese country’ and say that we should therefore ‘understand’ them better, meaning of course that we more than other countries should know our position in life and show deference even at the cost of our own interests.” See Bilahari Kausikan, *Dealing with an Ambiguous World* (Singapore: World Scientific Press, 2016) p.40.

Foreign Minister Yang reacted by leaving the meeting for an hour. When he returned, he gave a rambling 30-minute response in which he accused the United States of plotting against China on this issue, seemed to poke fun at Vietnam's socialist credentials and apparently threatened Singapore... "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact," he said, staring directly at Singapore's foreign minister, George Yeo, according to several participants at the meeting.²¹

The South China Sea dispute is becoming a "thorn in the side" in Sino-Singapore relations. Singapore is not a claimant state in the disputed South China Sea. However, in 2016, a series of spats between Beijing and the city-state climaxed with Terrex seizure (despite the "one country, two systems" which granted the latter some relative "autonomy").²² In June that year, the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in the Kunming city, Yunnan Province, co-chaired by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan (country coordinator for ASEAN's relations with Beijing for three years), turned out to be a fiasco.

Ironically, the event was meant to celebrate 25 years of good China-ASEAN relations. With the backdrop of Beijing's alarming reclamation of artificial islands in the disputed South China Sea and the then impending decision by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague, the acrimonious discussion over a proposed Code of Conduct for those troubled waters made no progress. Balakrishnan failed to appear with Wang Yi at the closing of the Kunming meeting and no joint statement between the host and ASEAN states was made --- arguably a failure of the diplomatic protocol on both sides.²³

The *Global Times*, a newspaper notorious for its vitriolic, nationalistic outbursts and under the CCP-controlled *People's Daily*, took umbrage with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's state visit to Washington in August 2016²⁴ and subsequent visit to Tokyo in September 2016 during which he made comments on the TPP (Trans Pacific Partnership), Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands, and the South China Sea that were

²¹ "U.S. takes a tougher tone with China," *Washington Post*, 30 July 2010.

²² "Singapore's hypocrisy exposed by seized military vehicles," *Global Times*, 27 November 2016.

²³ "ASEAN foreign ministers expressed serious concerns to China over South China Sea developments: Vivian," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 14 June 2016.

²⁴ "Singapore's security reliance on Washington will continue under Trump," *Global Times*, 6 December 2016.

deemed to be negative to Beijing.²⁵ It also attacked Singapore's role on behalf of ASEAN at the 17th NAM (Non Aligned Movement) in Venezuela in November 2016 for highlighting the South China Sea issue.²⁶ This led to a war of words between Singapore Ambassador to China Stanley Loh and *Global Times*' editor-in-chief Hu Xijin over the latter's fabrication of news on Singapore's role at the NAM.²⁷

The *Global Times* wrote: "Singapore was not a claimant state in the South China Sea dispute, but besides Vietnam and the Philippines, Singapore was the only ASEAN nation which gave explicit recognition to the so-called arbitration outcome... Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong again called on the relevant nations to 'respect' the so-called arbitration outcome during his visit to the United States." The same report continued: "Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Liu Zhenmin... said: 'Singapore is not a party to the South China Sea, and we hope Singapore can actively promote and strengthen the cooperation between ASEAN nations and China, enhance the coordination and play a bigger role without intervening in the South China Sea'."²⁸

Other Chinese hawks also attacked Singapore. Jin Yanan, the influential director of the strategic research institute at the PLA's National Defence University, advocated that Beijing should impose sanctions and retaliate against Singapore to make the Republic "pay the price for seriously damaging China's interests."²⁹ In his interview with state-owned China National Radio, Jin accused the city-state of taking an

²⁵ The Singapore media reported: "Chinese state-owned newspaper *Global Times* has published a series of reports critical of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's official visit to Japan this week, which sparked criticisms of Singapore among Chinese netizens. In its first report on Thursday morning (Sept 29), the newspaper claimed that Singapore 'again stirred up' the South China Sea issue." See "Global Times continues drumbeat of criticism against Singapore," *Today* (Singapore), 30 September 2016.

²⁶ "FM calls on Singapore to respect China's sea stance," *Global Times*, 28 September 2016.

²⁷ "Singapore 'disappointed' with 'irresponsible report' by *Global Times* on NAM Summit: MFA," *Today* (Singapore), 27 September 2016. Chinese scholar Feng Zhang wrote: "Beijing is not so much interested in getting the record straight as in sending a diplomatic signal that it wants Singapore to understand. The signal is essentially this: know your place and don't mess with us in the South China Sea. The Chinese media's treatment of facts may be cavalier, but the perception that Singapore is siding with the United States, the Philippines and Vietnam in opposing China, and thus overreacting in the South China Sea is now widespread inside China." Feng Zhang continued: "Beijing is now beginning to apply a sort of coercive diplomacy to pressure and even punish Singapore into acquiescing with China's position. The NAM incident is the culmination of the deterioration of China-Singapore relations this year, but it is only the beginning of a new Chinese approach of coercive diplomacy towards Singapore." Feng Zhang concluded: "The *Global Times*' report, regardless of its veracity, is nothing less than an explicit warning and bashing of Singapore's activism on the South China Sea issue." See Feng Zhang, "Start of China's coercive diplomacy towards Singapore," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 6 October 2016.

²⁸ *Global Times* article translated in "Global Times: Singapore raises South China Sea arbitration at NAM summit of heads of state despite opposition," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 27 September 2016.

²⁹ "China should make Singapore pay over South China Sea dispute, says PLA adviser," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 1 October 2016.

active role in turning the South China Sea into an international dispute. Presumably, Beijing will only be satisfied if Singapore remains silent on the South China Sea issue. But if Singapore were to be pressured to remain silent, then its sovereignty and dignity will be impaired.

Singapore's security concern: Terrorism

The city-state had to deal with terrorism within and outside its borders. In January 2016, its security agencies arrested 27 radicalized Bangladeshi nationals working in Singapore, planning acts of terrorism in their home country and the Middle East. In August 2016, the Singapore police force and other agencies stepped up inland and border security measures after six terror suspects were arrested by the Indonesian police for allegedly trying to hit the city-state's Marina Bay with rockets fired from the island of Batam in Indonesia.³⁰

In the same month, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs announced that a "total of 18 Singaporeans and four Bangladeshi nationals are currently in detention, while 24 Singaporeans are on restriction orders for terrorism."³¹ It remains to be seen whether Singapore will keep calm and retain its social cohesion if acts of terrorism and mayhem were to happen in the city-state.

Singapore's international contributions to regional security

In April 2016, Singapore's Ministry of Defence noted:

This year's deployment marks the fourth time that the SAF will be leading the CTF (Combined Task Force), and the 10th SAF deployment to the multinational anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden. Since the start of the SAF's contribution to CTF 151 in 2009, Singapore has deployed a total of 1,400 servicemen and women, five ships and one maritime patrol aircraft, spanning across the deployment of three SAF command teams, five task groups and one detachment. As a maritime nation, Singapore supports multinational efforts to maintain the safety and security of the world's key shipping lanes.³²

³⁰ "Singapore on alert after 6 terror suspects arrested in Batam over rockets plot," *Today* (Singapore), 5 August 2016.

³¹ "4 Singaporeans who supported Islamic State dealt with under ISA," *Channel News Asia*, 19 August 2016.

³² Ministry of Defence, Singapore, "Singapore Takes over Command of Multinational Counter-Piracy Task Force for Fourth Time," 1 April 2016.

In August 2016, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that the city-state will contribute in the fight against terrorism in Iraq by sending a SAF medical support team to that country. Soldiers from the Army Deployment Force (ADF) joined the medical team for force protection. The media reported that the “ADF is a rapid response anti-terrorist unit the size of a battalion that comprises highly trained soldiers with niche capabilities.”³³ In the same year, the SAF also sent its Imagery Analysis Team to the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Headquarters in Kuwait. Singapore Defence Minister Ng said that the team provided “useful intelligence support to identify terrorist infrastructure and facilities, and to avoid targeting civilian areas.”³⁴

Singapore's 2016 defence budget and new weapon acquisitions

Singapore's 2016 defence budget of S\$13.97 billion (US\$10.2 billion) was an increase of 6.4% over 2015. Indeed, the rate of growth is the city-state's fastest since 2011, with increases having averaged around 3.5% annually over the past five years.³⁵ The 2016 budget also saw defence expenditure increase as a proportion of GDP for the second consecutive year, rising to 3.4%.³⁶ Arguably, Singapore's hike in its defence expenditure is a reflection of its fear that Southeast Asia is an arena for geopolitical competition. Singapore's hi-tech weapon systems are of course not cheap.

In April 2016, Defence Minister Ng gave parliament an update on the SAF's plans for new acquisitions. They include: protected Combat Support Vehicles to replace current non-armoured wheeled platforms for combat service support functions, eight Littoral Mission Vessels (LMVs), two new Type 218SG submarines, new helicopters to replace its Super Pumas and CH-47 Chinook helicopters, and upgrading its F-16s with more advanced Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radars and air-to-ground weapons. The SAF will deploy more unmanned platforms beyond UAVs and will also invest more in cyber defence by doubling the headcount of the Cyber Defence Operations Hub (CDOH) by 2020.³⁷

³³ “SAF to send medical support team to Iraq, Army Deployment Force to protect the team,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), 3 August 2016.

³⁴ “Parliament: SAF to deploy imagery analysis team for another year to help anti-ISIS coalition,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), 28 January 2016.

³⁵ “Singapore increases defence budget 6.4% to SGD13.97 billion,” *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 29 March 2016.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ “SAF to beef up firepower, personnel for fight against terrorism: MINDEF,” *Channel News Asia*, 7 April 2016.

Epilogue

2016 was indeed a year of both “high and low” points for Singapore’s security outlook. That year ended on an uncertain note for the city-state’s strategic interests. The two imponderables are the policies that the new Trump Administration will adopt towards East Asia and the attitude and behaviour of a rising China towards the smaller ASEAN countries. Singapore will have to navigate carefully between these two great powers.