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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Welcome to the Lion City, Mr. President: Perspective of two American Students in Singapore**

Eric Sayers and Clint Lorimore

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*President Obama's visit to our current home of Singapore for this year's APEC summit offers an opportunity to reflect on the value of one of America's less high-profile relationships and what it holds for US strategy in the Asia-Pacific.*

SMALL IN geographic scope and with little material power to shape its regional security environment, the former British colony of Singapore finds itself sensitive to ongoing developments in the region. It is eager to ensure the continued presence of the United States to stand guard against undesired fluctuations in the regional balance of power. Singapore's strategic outlook and foreign policy decision-making therefore offer a revealing insight into the security dynamics shaping the region and the future role that America can play in helping to influence them.

### **Why we came to Singapore**

As American citizens, we came to Singapore to study what we felt were the two most prescient regional security trends facing our country: the development of China's comprehensive national power and the challenge of violent Islamist radicalisation in Southeast Asia. We believed it was important to study in a country that was not just part of the region, but which also found itself intimately affected by two of the same issues that are driving American security concerns. In Singapore, albeit on a different scale than in the US, these issues are receiving considerable attention from the government as well as the various academic institutions and think-tanks that contribute to Singapore's impressive level of strategic thinking on national security matters. Moreover, it is these core issues that have served to draw our two countries even closer in the past decade, forming the foundation for what some Singapore watchers have called a "quasi-alliance".

At only 687 square kilometres, or roughly 3.5 times the size of the District of Columbia, Singapore lacks strategic depth against foreign attack and remains almost entirely dependent on the outside world for resources. Such vulnerabilities have led Singaporean decision-makers to be extremely sensitive to anything which might impact the country's stability. Challenges such as piracy, terrorism and troubles in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia can have a direct impact on the city-state. In an effort to

maintain stability and be self-reliant for its own security, Singapore has invested in strengthening the Singapore Armed Forces to ensure a sub-regional balance of power.

Although Singapore does not find itself threatened by the rise of China, at the regional level this phenomenon and its associated developments also stand to greatly complicate the broad trends affecting Singapore's security. Maximising limited resources, Singapore has sought to maintain the status quo in Asia by enmeshing large powers like China in a series of regional institutions. However, its most important means for muting the effects generated by China's rise has been to encourage the continued presence and constructive engagement of the US in Asia. The decision by the Philippines in 1991 to end a basing agreement with the US created an opening for Singapore to directly facilitate the level of American engagement it desired. It hosted US forces on the island and constructed the Changi Naval Base to accommodate US carrier strike groups. A long-term relationship with an America that is willing and able to sustain its predominant position in the Pacific remains a core strategic interest for Singapore.

### **Convergence of Strategic Interests**

Since 9/11 the US has actively engaged Southeast Asia with a focus on counter terrorism issues. Southeast Asia is home to more than 200 million Muslims, and is facing the challenge of terrorist groups. In July this year, a splinter cell of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) carried out dual suicide bombings at the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Jakarta. While these attacks took place in neighbouring Indonesia, numerous arrests of JI members in Singapore have shown it is not immune to the threat. The US and Singapore continue to work actively behind the scenes on counter terrorism efforts.

The value for America in its relationships with states like Singapore should not be underestimated. In an environment where the maritime commons are scheduled to become increasingly contested, America must keep alliance-management at the centre of its efforts. Making and keeping friends in the Pacific has never been more important. Geographically Singapore sits astride one of the most important maritime zones in the world and provides access for US naval forces into both the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Even more importantly, its stable and pragmatic government makes Singapore one of the most dependable partners for the US. Just as Singapore views America as an indispensable presence in the region, the US should consider Singapore an equally crucial pillar in its long-term Pacific strategy.

President Obama's visit to Singapore is a good opportunity to demonstrate America's appreciation for Singapore and the value it sees in the relationship. The President's decision to bring along Secretary Hillary Clinton, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, and US Trade Representative Ron Kirk to the APEC summit sends a strong message that America has not lost sight of the strategic importance of Southeast Asia. This is especially true when combined with Secretary Clinton's recent signing of the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in July.

### **What President Obama Should do in Singapore**

During the President's three days in Singapore he should give a speech singling out Singapore and recognising the importance of the bilateral ties between the countries. He should also take time to visit the Changi Naval Base to show his appreciation for the vital role the city-state plays for US strategic interests in the region. This is especially important in view of the reverberations of current defence budget policy in Washington. Their implications may initiate doubts about America's sustainable presence as the region's predominant power.

Great Britain's withdrawal from Singapore in the late 1960s and early 1970s generated a heightened sense of insecurity for the island-nation and forced it to undertake a radical shift in its defence policy. Should the US allow its presence to be reduced, it is likely a similar recalculation of Singapore's

defence posture may lead to a shift in its geostrategic priorities, possibly in directions unfavourable to Washington's interests.

Washington should retain the level of influence required to manage the continuation of a balance of power that favours freedom in the region. For this, it will have to invest in Asia's future with both the diplomatic and material power necessary to sustain its position of indispensability in the eyes of powers like Singapore that act as potent enablers of its geostrategic presence.

*Eric Sayers is pursuing a M.Sc in Strategic Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Clint Lorimore is a Ph.D. candidate and Associate Research Fellow at the school's Centre of Excellence for National Security.*