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Singapore's Defence Spending: A Long-term Approach

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13 January 2010

Singapore's defence acquisition has been incorrectly assessed by a Malaysian geostrategist as one that does not take into account of costs. Singapore's defence spending takes a long-term view of actual security needs and its defence procurement process is guided by the principle of seeking the most cost-effective system.

IN HIS 30 December 2009 Utusan Online op-ed, *Rationale in Replacing Mig-29N*, Azmi Hassan, a geostrategist at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), suggested that the “acquisition of the SAF defence assets...normally does not take into account the cost involved, but only on one factor, which is strategic interest to ensure the country's sovereignty”. The writer further argued that the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) “can afford to plan its defence strategy thoroughly because of its huge yearly allocation”.

Azmi Hassan's assertions of Singapore's defence spending as a costly sacred cow and Singapore's defence strategy being based on supposedly endless ‘blank cheques’ are off the mark for three main reasons: Firstly, Singapore's defence strategy is based on real-time and long-term security needs; secondly, Singapore's defence spending takes a long-term view of actual security needs; and finally, Singapore's defence procurement process is based on a rigorous evaluation system guided by the principle of seeking the most cost-effective system.

Singapore's Defence Strategy and Posture

Singapore's inherent structural vulnerabilities stem primarily from its small size in land mass, population and virtual lack of natural resources. In addition, any serious disruption of Singapore's maritime links threatens not just its economic wellbeing – but its very survival. In short, even in the absence of a clearly defined enemy, the strategic vulnerabilities inherent in Singapore's geostrategic position provide the main basis for strategic planning, defence doctrine and strategic posture. These structural vulnerabilities are further accentuated by real-time contemporary threats such as piracy, transnational terrorism and the increasing range of Operations other than War (OOTW)-type missions that the SAF is expected to undertake now and in the near future.

It is undeniable that certain painful historical memories from its colonial past and early years of independence have reinforced Singapore's sense of vulnerability. The fall of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, the shattering of the impregnable 'Gibraltar of the East' fortress myth and the subsequent occupation years was a traumatic experience from which two lessons were drawn: first, Singapore's lack of strategic depth requires a 'Forward Defence' posture; and second, it must have robustly self-reliant armed forces capable of independent deterrence. The latter was further ingrained into the national psyche and body politic after the precipitated withdrawal of the United Kingdom from its 'East of Suez' role announced in 1967 and the subsequent closure of its military bases in Singapore by 1971. Even considering all of the above, Singapore's defence strategy is not premised on a limitless pot of gold but actual and perceived security needs.

Singapore's Defence Spending in Perspective

In justifying Singapore's S\$11.45 billion defence budget for 2009, Singapore's Minister for Defence, Teo Chee Hean cautioned against taking a 'feast and famine' approach to defence spending. In short, Singapore's approach to defence spending is premised on the belief that regardless of economic conditions, security threats do not simply disappear. Hence, a steady defence budget that accounts for five to six percent of National GDP is necessary to maintain the operational readiness of the SAF and indicates Singapore's firm resolve to defend its sovereignty and strategic interests.

That commitment is not the same as Azmi Hassan's assertion that it "does not take into account the cost involved". In fact Singapore's defence procurement process is based on a rigorous evaluation system guided by the principle of seeking the most cost-effective system. Singapore's acquisition of Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) equipped Archer-class submarines from Sweden is less than half the cost of the Royal Malaysian Navy's (RMN) brand new Scorpene Submarines of the basic non-AIP configuration. The Archer-class vessels were former Swedish Navy Västergötland-class submarines purchased and refitted to Södermanland-class standards at less than half the cost of a brand new AIP-equipped submarine.

When the time came to replace the aging A-4 Skyhawks of the Republic of Singapore Airforce (RSAF), the eventual selection of the F-15SG was made over a seven-year evaluation period. The F-15SG based on the venerable F-15 platform is a formidable combat proven aircraft with an air-to-air combat record of 104 kills to zero losses. Singapore's selection of the F-15SG was not based on preferences for any particular country or supplier, but on cost-effectiveness and operational requirements. Indeed, defence analysts have referred to Singapore's rigorous selection process as a bellwether for fighter acquisitions on the global market.

Tender proposals for the SAF's major programmes are subject to rigorous evaluation where the financial, technical, schedule and commercial aspects are assessed to ensure that the most cost-effective system is selected. Singapore's defence acquisition policy is not to buy the newest piece of kit that money can buy, but to meet the SAF's operational requirements while maximising Singapore's defence dollars.

Regional Perceptions

In his article on multi-role combat aircraft (MRCA), Azmi Hassan concluded that "US-manufactured jet fighters like the F5, F15 and F16, like those owned by the Singapore Air Force, cannot beat the SU-30". He said further: "If the acquisition of the 18 SU-30 jet fighters can place the RMAF as the dominant air master in the region, then the acquisition of the SU-30 and MRCA will have made it so. Such a perception is not only important for the country's defence, but more important, to ascertain the sovereignty of Malaysia."

Rather than challenge the sovereignty of any other regional neighbour, Singapore's recent acquisition

of the Block-52+ variant of the F-16 and F-15SG is to meet genuine defence requirements. Contrary to Azmi Hassan's claims, any planned replacement of the RMAF's Mig-29s will be undertaken in the context of Malaysia's ongoing efforts to modernise its aircraft inventory -- not to establish itself "as the dominant air master in the region".

Both Singapore and Malaysia have common interests in the continued stability of the region and the close links between their armed forces at the unit and individual levels stand as a testament to that fraternity in arms.

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