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The United States: Still Singapore's Indispensable Partner?

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See Seng Tan, Deputy Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore, explains that “despite Singapore’s proclivity to hedge, the United States remains the city-state’s default security choice should things go horribly wrong and well beyond the ability of Singapore’s armed forces to manage.”

Two events in November 2014 underscore the political complexities Singapore faces as a security partner of the United States. On the one hand, the USS Fort Worth, a Freedom-class U.S. Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), began a sixteen-month rotational deployment out of Singapore, picking up where its predecessor, the USS Freedom, left off. The deployment of the LCSs – neither based nor home-ported in Singapore, as the city-state’s defense officials have insisted – has been seen by many as a clear indication of Singapore’s robust support for the Obama Administration’s “Asia pivot.” On the other hand, the sight of Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) soldiers conducting artillery and tank drills in the third of a series of exercises alongside their counterparts from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in Nanjing has raised eyebrows across the region over Singapore’s perceived commitment to Washington’s rebalancing effort.

To those familiar with Singapore’s propensity to hedge against the major powers, the seemingly contradictory spectacle of the city-state playing both sides is not altogether surprising. While rising tensions in the South China Sea have understandably led some claimant states to pursue closer defense ties with the United States, Japan, and others in a putative effort to balance China’s power and influence, non-claimants like Singapore have refrained from taking sides while urging for restraint from all concerned parties. Hedging is a strategic orientation that has served Singapore well since it gained independence in 1965, where the geographical proximity of major powers like the Soviet Union during the Cold War and China since the end of the Cold War, as well as territorial contiguity with Muslim-majority neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia, make unqualified intimacy with the United States a difficult proposition.

Yet these complexities have not prevented Singapore from getting as close to the United States as it has done. While not a formal ally of the United States, Singapore has nonetheless long regarded the US as a vital security partner. This view stems from Singaporean leaders’ perception and acknowledgment of the indispensability of the United States to the security and stability of Asia. Referring to America’s role in the region as “positive and unique,” Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told a Washington audience in 2007 that despite a changing landscape with the emergence of new powers, “America still plays a role which nobody else can play, holding the ring and fostering the stability of the region, enabling other countries to grow and prosper in a stable environment.”

Such a conclusion may seem odd to some since, in many ways, the United States and Singapore make an odd couple. Politically distinct – one the world’s foremost

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economic and military power and a paragon of liberal democracy, the other a tiny city-state with an illiberal political tradition – the two nonetheless share a belief in market capitalism, in the need for stability and access within the global commons, and in the rule of law. Despite occasional hiccups that have threatened to mar political ties between them, the United States and Singapore have historically enjoyed robust relations. Nowhere is this more evident than in their defense and security relationship, which has grown steadily and surely since the late 1960s when Singapore actively supported Washington’s war effort in Vietnam and looked to the United States as a strategic guarantor in the wake of Britain’s military retreat from the east of Suez. Indeed, it is not incorrect to say of Singapore’s partnership with the United States that, in key respects, it extends beyond the quality of the latter’s alliances with some Asian states even at a time when most are upgrading their defense ties with Washington in the context of the U.S. rebalance.

However, unlike the Philippines and Thailand, Singapore has opted against a formal alliance with the United States. In 2003, Singapore reportedly declined an offer from the United States to be a major non-NATO ally, favoring instead the nomenclature of a “major security cooperation partner of the United States” provided for under the Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security (SFA) signed in July 2005 between then-President George W. Bush and PM Lee Hsien Loong. Reportedly born out of a shared desire to address common threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the 2005 SFA built on areas – already extensive – of bilateral defense and security cooperation. These areas include cooperation provided for under the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in Singapore (1990 MOU) and its 1998 Addendum, which grant the U.S. military access to the air base at Paya Lebar, the new Changi Naval Base (big enough to dock aircraft carriers even though Singapore does not own any), and the port of Sembawang in Singapore where Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific (COMLOG WESTPAC) – the unit responsible for coordinating U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) military exercises – relocated from the Philippines. These facilities were regularly utilized by U.S. forces en route to Afghanistan and for use in various counterterrorism operations following the 9/11 attacks.

It is fair to say that despite Singapore’s proclivity to hedge, the United States remains the city-state’s default security choice should things go horribly wrong and well beyond the ability of Singapore’s armed forces to manage. Although the regional rhetoric in Southeast Asia overtly advocates a balance of power among the major powers, the fact that many Southeast Asian policymakers favor the continued preponderance of benign U.S. power in their region implies that an equilibrium among great powers is not what many Southeast Asians, not least Singaporeans, actually hope for. But it also implies that for countries like Singapore, for whom U.S. power is deemed indispensable to the stability and security of the region, their incessant promotion of a regional balance of power is presumably an implicit legitimization of America’s continued presence and leadership in Asia.

Seen against Chinese President Xi Jinping’s recent hints in apparent favor of an exclusive regionalism that ostensibly omits the United States from Asia, Singapore’s perspective of an indispensable America will likely strengthen rather than weaken.

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