

SINGAPORE: BALANCING BETWEEN WEST AND EAST

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***Abstract:** Due to its location at the intersection between the spheres of influence of multiple regional players, as well as its socio-cultural composition, Singapore had to conduct a diplomatic policy of balancing in order to secure its existence and develop its armed forces. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the defence policy of the state of Singapore, the characteristics of its military cooperation with its main partners and whether the diplomatic policy of balancing diplomatic relationships with powerful countries, motivated by diverging goals, impacts the military development of Singapore. The research method used is the observation of the military diplomatic relations of Singapore’s armed forces, as well as the of its military acquisition policies.*

***Keywords:** alliance; gateway; military diplomacy; influence; strategic partnerships.*

Preliminary considerations

Ever since its independence, Singapore had to contend with a series of challenges to its survival and prosperity, due to a multitude of reasons.

One has been its geographical position, the location of the state allowing its government to control and, if need be, interdict the maritime traffic through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, one of the most transited such areas in the world.

Another reason has been its relatively small sized-territory, Singapore’s surface placing it more in the category of city-states, its size being dwarfed by that of its neighbours.

One further reason has been, due to the policies of the Singapore government, its internal structure dictating its foreign affairs actions. Singapore has been, since its inception, a multicultural place, where the majority of its citizens are of ethnic Chinese descent sympathetic to China (Yong 2021), with considerable numbers of citizens being of Indian or Malay ethnicities, Singapore itself thus having to balance not only these ethnic groups, but, more importantly, the countries of origins of these groups.

As a result, Singapore has conducted ever since its inception a policy of military and economic cooperation with powers around the world, countries such as Israel being one of its main partners. At the same time, Singapore conducts a balancing policy between the two main regional players, the United States of America (U.S.) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Singapore conducts activities such as those of military diplomatic nature, such as training exercises, with the militaries of each state, thus becoming a gateway for conducting diplomacy, such as the 2018 Summit organized to mediate between the United States and the Chinese-aligned North Korea the finding of common ground in order to de-escalate the tensions in the Korean peninsula.

Singapore’s overarching national defence strategy is that of “Total Defence” meant to protect the country through measures taken to reinforce the military, civilian, economic, social, psychological and digital sectors of the Singapore society (Government of Singapore 2024).

Thus, in order to strengthen the military sector, the Singapore government has taken steps with regards to the development of efficient military industry, able to build and maintain weapon systems to defend against the latest regional security challenges. The other important aspect to strengthen this sector has been the creation and maintaining of a well-trained military force, consisting

of both an active duty component, as well as a reserve component, regularly called up for training, in order to be able to be promptly activated and deployed alongside the active duty servicemen.

Since its establishment, the State of Singapore's survival depended on the evolution of its military diplomatic relations with powerful states, such as Israel, U.S. and P.R.C. in order to organise and develop its armed forces and military industry.

1. Significant military relations of the state of Singapore

1.1 Singapore-Israel military relations

Ever since their establishment, both the Israeli state, as well as the Singaporean one faced similar situations.

Firstly, both Singapore and Israel had neighbouring countries that were able to field not only large armed forces, but also military industrial complexes necessary to support these units in case of a conventional conflict.

Secondly, the neighbours of Singapore and Israel were, particularly during the Cold War, most willing to threaten the sovereignty of the new states, in Israel's case due to religious motives, whilst in Singapore's case due to geopolitical reasons.

Thus, the strategic partnership between the states has been one of natural necessity for Singapore. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) starting deployment of military advisers to Singapore for training its fledgling armed forces even from 1965, the year Singapore became independent, with Singapore, particularly, enjoying the benefits of such cooperation (Maital 2023).

Firstly, Singapore modelled its armed forces after those of the IDF, relying on a core of active duty servicemen meant to respond quickly to an emergency, augmented by a large mass of reservists. Furthermore, as in the case of the IDF, the state of Singapore prefers to use yearly conscription in order to replenish the ranks of the armed forces and to conduct regular exercises to maintain the readiness of the reservists (National Heritage Board 2022).

Secondly, Israel's military industry has provided the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) not only with the military systems necessary to equip its units, but, most importantly, to develop Singapore's indigenous capabilities, with cooperation between Singapore and Israeli defence contractors routinely taking place to this day (ST Engineering 2020) (DSTA 2023a).

Israel also continues to enjoy the results of its long running partnership with Singapore. Ranging from purchases of Israeli designed military equipment by the Singapore Armed Forces and intelligence sharing for counter-terrorism purposes to commercial cooperation in areas such as biotechnology, both the Israeli government and the Israeli private sector are benefitting from the special relationship between the two states (MITTELMAN 2016).

1.2 Singapore-Commonwealth military relations

Singapore's past, present and, to an extent, future continues to also be tied to those of the United Kingdom and the South-East Asian countries that gained independence after the disestablishment of the British Empire, primarily Australia, Malaysia and New Zealand (Commonwealth members).

The 1967 retreat of a large proportion of the British military units deployed to the East of the Suez Canal resulted in the newly independent countries in the area, Singapore included.

In order to pre-empt possible conflicts between the new nations and to strengthen military cooperation, the British government, nonetheless, initiated the establishment of a series of treaties between the Commonwealth members of the area, with this set of documents being termed the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) (Mahmud 2022).

Under these Arrangements, the abiding parties consented to mutual consultation in case of an attack or a threat from an external source, whilst at the same time providing the blueprints for deepening defence cooperation.

In the case of Singapore, the main effect of the Arrangements was the continuation of the existence of the Singapore Naval Base operated by the Royal Navy, transformed into the British Defence Singapore Support Unit, its main purpose being that of serving as a staging area for the deployment of Royal Navy task forces in the region (Zakaria 2024) (Ministry of Defence 2023), with Royal Navy carrier task forces making regular visits in the South China Sea whilst having Singapore as a launch point (Lin 2021). At the same time, the FPDA continues to be a source of security for Singapore, with regular exercises taking place in which the Singapore Armed Forces take part in order to enhance between its units and those of the regional allied nations (MINDEF Singapore 2023).

1.3 Singapore-U.S. military relations

Another important pillar of Singapore’s military system has been its relationship with the United States. Even though the relation started under strenuous grounds, the Singaporean government trying to maintain a balance between all the regional powers (TIME 1965), Singapore eventually moderated its stance, the relationship with the United States becoming one of increased cooperation (Chang 2015) (Sim 2019).

One important aspect of this relationship has been the expanding role of the American military industry as a key supplier of weapon systems and capabilities to the Singaporean Armed Forces, one of Singapore’s most valued assets, and thus a guarantee of its survival, its combat aircraft fleet being manufactured in the United States (BUREAU OF POLITICAL-MILITARY AFFAIRS 2023).

Another aspect of this relationship, that of establishment of common training detachments and bases, has been solidified by the signing of a number of treaties, such as the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement (MINDEF Singapore 2023), as well as the Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in Singapore (MINDEF Singapore 2019). Thus, in order to increase interoperability between the Singapore Armed Forces and the United States Armed Forces, the Singaporean government stationing detachments of aircraft and air force personnel at American military bases in Guam and Arizona (MINDEF Singapore 2017), whilst the United States constantly deploys warships and maritime patrol aircrafts to Singapore, to increase the cooperation between the two nations, as well as conduct “freedom of movement” and surveillance operations in the South China Sea (Mahadzir 2023).

One particularity of the Singapore-US military relationship has been that the places of deployment of American forces on Singapore soil have not been termed as military bases (MINDEF Singapore 2019) (MINDEF Singapore 2023), being instead defined as “military facilities for transit and logistics support” (MINDEF Singapore 2019). Also, since 2022, the Singaporean Armed Forces have started taking part in the Garuda Shield exercises lead by the United States and its partners in the region, such as Australia and Japan, signalling the deepening of ties between Singapore and the United States (MINDEF Singapore 2023).

1.4 Singapore-PRC military relations

Although the Singaporean government was initially wary during the Cold War of extending relations with China, partially due to the presence of a sizeable percentage of ethnic Chinese in Singapore, as well as partially due to the ideological differences between the two countries’ ideologies, Maoism and liberalism, the rapprochement between the United States and China during the 1970s resulted in a similar thaw in Singapore-PRC relations.

Their initial contacts in trade were followed (Woon 2023), especially after the end of the Cold War, by an increased military cooperation between the Singaporean Armed Forces and the People’s Liberation Army, resulting also in a drawdown in the interactions between the SAF and Taiwan’s military.

The emphasis of Singapore-PRC's military relationship has been placed, so far, on training, with the 2008 Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation, as well as the 2022 Agreements leading to regular common exercises being conducted by the militaries of the two nations, as well as the establishment of academic exchange programs for military students of the two nations (Singapore 2008) (Aqil Haziq 2022), with the recent 2023 Memorandum of Understanding expanding the cooperation into deconfliction procedures, with the establishment of an urgent telephone link between the military leaderships of the two countries (MINDEF Singapore 2023).

Thus far, the Chinese government has neither signalled any intent of deploying troops to Singapore soil, in a similar manner to the American forces deployed in the city-state, even though the move has reportedly been considered (Office of the Secretary of Defence 2020).

At the same time, another noteworthy aspect of the Singapore-PRC military diplomatic relationship is that there have been neither no official trade of military technology between the two states, nor any official announcement results of a military technical cooperation between the two countries.

2. Singapore's military industrial complex

One of Singapore's greatest assets with regards to its survival as a state and the overall American-Chinese competition in the area is, undoubtedly, its own military industrial complex.

From its independence, Singapore has sought to establish itself as a considerable military power, both in terms of actual armed forces and, also, in terms of capabilities of its own military industry.

One such attempt has been the establishment of the Chartered Industries of Singapore, a company focused mainly on the maintenance of foreign designed small arms, light weapons and their associated ammunition (Chua 2022). With the passing of time, the company evolved into current day ST Engineering, with the three branches, Aerospace, Land and Maritime (ST Engineering 2023a), servicing the needs of the corresponding branches of the Singapore Armed Forces. At the same time, in order to ensure the Singaporean Armed Forces are kept supplied with equipment that cannot be manufactured in Singapore, the government established the Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA), whose main objective is that of managing the entire defence procurement systems (DSTA 2023b).

At the same time, one of the things to be noticed is that, although so far, Singapore was focused on the importation, maintenance and upgrade of military technology from countries such as Germany, France or the United States, to an extent, its military industry is trying to become capable of assimilating foreign designs into production, a major step into becoming self-sufficient.

In the aerial domain, the Singapore Air Force has consistently equipped its units with equipment designed in foreign countries, such as the F-15E, the F-16, and the AH-64 forming the bulk of Singapore's combat air fleet (Force, author's note). The recent purchase of F-35s from the U.S., especially the insufficient numbers thus far (12) (Yeo 2023a), may be interpreted as signalling that, in the foreseeable future, Singapore will continue ordering more F-35s to replace the 4th generation aircraft in service, thus further relying on foreign designed airplanes to secure its airspace.

In the naval domain, this tendency continues, with the Singaporean Navy relying so far on foreign designed platforms, such as the Formidable class frigates from France and the Type 218 class submarines being envisioned to form the backbone of Singapore's combat seafaring force in the near-future (MINDEF Singapore 2024a) (MINDEF Singapore 2024b). At the same time, the start of the Multi-role Combat Vessels frigates program signals the start of Singapore's attempts into becoming a self-sufficient military ship manufacturer, with the six vessels, although developed from the Danish Iver Huitfeldt and Absalon class frigates, are stated to be

manufactured at the ST Engineering shipyards in Singapore (Yeo, 2023b), a major steps in ensuring Singapore's ability to protect its maritime borders.

In the land domain, also, the Singaporean military industries are starting to become self-sufficient, with systems such as the Hunter and Terrex Armoured Fighting Vehicles entering service in considerable numbers (MINDEF Singapore 2024c) (MINDEF Singapore 2024d). At the same time, it must be kept in mind that, even in the case of these vehicles, they remain reliant on foreign sourced equipment, such as power packs being purchased from the United States and Germany (Wong 2019) (ST Engineering 2023b), whilst the turrets originate from Israel (Dombe 2019).

At the same time, it can be considered that the continued reliance of the Singapore Armed Forces for foreign designed equipment has impacted Singapore's potential as a weapons exporter. Singapore's military exports have thus far been limited in both scope and scale, with the only notable exception being small numbers of armoured fighting vehicles being delivered to Ghana and Thailand (Claes 2004) (Boguslavsky 2020).

Conclusions

Currently, Singapore nominally to maintain its policy of neutrality between the United States and China, its armed forces carrying out exercises regularly with the militaries of these nations. At the same time, Singapore continues to have a favoured relationship with the United States, as well as the United Kingdom, allowing deployment of American and British military detachments on Singaporean soil meant to conduct operations in the South China Sea, being possible to argue that the United States, and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom, hold a greater degree of influence in Singapore compared to that of China's.

Furthermore, this tendency continues with regards to the acquisitions policies conducted by the Singaporean Armed Forces, with most of its weapon systems coming from Western countries, such as France, Germany and Denmark or from the United States.

The potential of the outbreak of an open conflict between the United States and China would prove disastrous to the region and, especially to Singapore, whose best chance of preventing such a situation would be by deepening its policy of balance between the two world powers and continuing to actively promote cooperation between the two of them, with Singapore continuing its role as a gateway of diplomacy.

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