CADET PERSPECTIVE

Navigating the Power Tides

Singapore’s Diplomatic Dance with the United States and China

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Abstract

Recently, Indo-Pacific states have found themselves embroiled in a competition between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the United States for influence. Particularly concerning is the notable increase in military cooperation between long-standing US partner Singapore and the PRC. This article asserts, through a comprehensive analysis of Singaporean military cooperation with China and the United States, that Singapore’s overwhelmingly positive relationship with the United States remains secure. Key leader engagements, joint military exercises, memorandums of understanding, and professional military exchanges will be the focus of this article’s examination. Unlike other works on the subject, this article specifically employs a case study to scrutinize a US partner’s susceptibility to Chinese influence. By illuminating these developments, the article offers insights pertinent to the US military as they strategize and implement their operations in the region alongside US partner forces.

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Since 2014, countries in the Indo-Pacific have found themselves ensnared in a competition for influence between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the United States. This rings particularly true for the Republic of Singapore, a long-standing US partner that in recent years has faced substantial overtures from the PRC. Singapore has officially adopted a nonaligned approach toward the US-China great-power competition, characterized by its simultaneous pursuit of advantage and risk mitigation to balance its relationships.¹ Nonetheless, many commentators have suggested that Singapore’s increasing military cooperation with the PRC signals a potential shift in strategic posture that could jeopardize the delicate balance of power in the region.²

² Lan Yunzhou, “李显龙总理：新美合作紧密不代表我国将涉入美国的战争 (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong: Close cooperation between New Zealand and the United States does not mean that our country will get involved in the United States’ war),” Lianhe Zaobao, 10 April 2022, https://www.zaobao.com.sg/.
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This article assesses the status of PRC–Singapore defense relations and explores the implications of their expanding military collaboration. Ultimately, by comparing Singaporean military cooperation with both China and the United States, the article contends that worries about Singapore succumbing to Chinese influence are exaggerated. Singapore’s exceptionally favorable relationship with the United States remains secure.

Various characteristics must be considered when assessing the strength of a military relationship between two nations. The article’s focus centers on key leader engagements, joint military exercises, memorandums of understanding (MOU), and other defense cooperation agreements, as well as professional military exchanges. While not exhaustive, as the Sino-Singaporean relationship remains relatively unexplored and both parties are notably reserved about their activities, these aspects provide critical insights. For instance, regarding defense technology coproduction and intelligence sharing, evidence of engagement is scarce, and discussions primarily rely on conjecture.

Both the frequency and substance of cooperative activities are pivotal in determining the overall strength of a relationship along each dimension. Infrequent actions and a lack of tangible results suggest a weaker relationship compared to frequent engagements yielding clear positive outcomes. Additionally, the scope and scale of such activities relative to a state’s engagements with other nations play a significant role in assessing a particular relationship’s relative importance. While individual activities may not offer substantial insights into military-to-military relations, a comprehensive analysis across time and space promises a more accurate portrayal.

Key Leader Engagement

The PRC and Singapore have engaged in frequent high-level leader meetings since 2017. That year, the Republic of Singapore and the PRC revitalized the Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation and Related Joint Steering Council Meetings (JCBC), reaffirming both countries’ “commitment to deepen defense ties.”³ In February 2018, the two defense ministers convened once more in Singapore, exchanging views on “regional security, the relationship between the two nations, as well as the defense cooperation between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).”⁴ Singapore held the rotating chair of ASEAN-China

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relations and assumed the chair of ASEAN that year, providing significant opportunities for collaboration with China and representation of Southeast Asia as a whole. Throughout Singapore’s tenure as dual-chair, China and Singapore engaged in frequent defense dialogues. Although precise details of these discussions are not readily available, these events signify a trend of heightened PRC–Singapore key leader engagement preceding the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, these interactions persisted within the cyber domain. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) conducted annual video conferences and phone calls discussing COVID-19 containment, regional security, and bilateral relations. Despite a reduction in the frequency of key leader engagements during the pandemic, communication between the Republic of Singapore and the PRC persisted. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, the two nations resumed their regular meetings. However, despite their frequency, key leader engagements between Singapore and China remain superficial, with minimal commitments, often characterized by limited statements expressing wishes for “continuously healthy development between the two countries.”

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On the other hand, Singapore’s key leader engagements with the United States reinforce the two countries’ enduring positive relations and occur with equal or greater frequency compared to those with China, with the most recent meeting taking place as recently as December 2023.\textsuperscript{10} While interactions between China and Singapore are limited to their respective defense ministers, Singapore’s engagements with the United States involve heads of state from both nations meeting with defense officials and senior leaders from other departments to discuss how defense matters align within the broader cooperative framework between the two countries.\textsuperscript{11}

Furthermore, Singaporean and American defense officials engage in direct and transparent dialogue, consistently producing defense agreements and robust statements underscoring the significance both Singapore and the United States attribute to the relationship.\textsuperscript{12} The meetings between the Singaporean Ministry of Defense and the Department of Defense are not incidental but rather institutionalized affairs that complement regular military-to-military exchanges, such as the Singapore–US Strategic Security Policy Dialogue, which convened for its twelfth iteration in 2022.\textsuperscript{13} Each meeting that Singapore holds with the United States is meticulously planned and serves a clear purpose, reflecting the depth of consideration and intent behind the engagement.

**Military Exercises**

Since 2009, there have been eight joint military training exercises between the PLA and SAF. The initial Army exercise aimed to enhance counterterrorism capabilities, with 61 soldiers from each country participating in simulated terrorist bomb attacks.\textsuperscript{14} Subsequent Army exercises also concentrated on counterterrorism, culminating in a significant urban counterterrorism training exercise in Singapore.


\textsuperscript{13} “Singapore and US Strengthen Defence Relations through Strategic Security Policy Dialogue.”

in 2023, involving approximately 120 soldiers from both nations—the largest such exercise between the two countries to date.\textsuperscript{15}

Naval exercises between the two navies typically span no more than four days and involve only a small number of ships, focusing on fundamental gunnery and maneuver drills.\textsuperscript{16} The most recent naval exercise, named Maritime Cooperation 2023, occurred from 28 April to 1 May of that year.\textsuperscript{17} The two navies conducted a four-day exercise with four vessels within the Strait of Malacca, emphasizing naval defense.\textsuperscript{18}

In contrast, from 2019 to 2023, Singapore has actively participated in annual large-scale military exercises with ASEAN and the United States. In May 2023, approximately 650 troops from both the US and Singapore engaged in the forty-second iteration of Exercise Tiger Balm.\textsuperscript{19} This two-week exercise represents the longest-standing bilateral exercise between the two countries, originating in 1981. From Exercise Forging Sabre to Red Flag and Cobra Gold, Singapore commemorates decades of defensive cooperation with the United States, signaling a steadfast commitment to this relationship.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, with Exercise Super Garuda Shield in 2022, Singapore demonstrated its readiness to engage in new training


\textsuperscript{17} “扫雷舰亮相中新联合军演引关注 (Minesweeper’s appearance in China-Singapore joint military exercise attracts attention,” Sohu, 3 May 2023, https://www.sohu.com/.


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In contrast, Singapore’s exercises with China are characterized by their small-scale and ad hoc nature, primarily serving to demonstrate Singapore’s efforts to balance its relationships with both countries.

Available evidence indicates that the PLA and SAF do not engage in joint operations training exercises. Furthermore, the size and duration of the training exercises they do undertake are comparatively modest when contrasted with joint training exercises led by the United States in the region. While these training exercises signify a cordial relationship between the two militaries, they do not reach the level necessary for the formation of a cohesive joint force capable of conducting large-scale combat operations.

Defense Technology Coproduction

Based on the data collected from publicly available sources during this research, there is no indication of any coproduction of defense technology between Singapore and the PRC. Furthermore, there is no evidence of defense technology imports or exports between the two countries. The sole publicly available data on imports of defense technology from the Singaporean Ministry of Defense pertains to the procurement of F-35 aircraft and other weaponry from the United States. Given Singapore’s transparency in disclosing its foreign defense technology acquisitions, the absence of evidence regarding Singaporean–PRC exchange of defense technology suggests that such activities are not occurring.

Defense Memorandum of Understanding and Agreements

As of July 2023, the sole accessible open-source data on defense MOUs between Singapore and the PRC relates to the agreement signed during the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2023. This MOU established a secure telephone link “for high-level communications” between the two Ministries of Defense.

This MOU emerged directly from the more substantial Enhanced Agreement on Defense Exchanges and Security Cooperation (ADESC) signed on 20 October 2019. This updated version of the ADESC builds upon the agreement initially signed in 2008, aiming to formalize defense cooperation between Singapore and the PRC. Indeed, discernible developments and implications within

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the Singapore-PRC relationship have emerged following the signing of the enhanced ADESC.\(^{24}\)

While the scale and frequency of training exercises between Singapore and China experienced marginal increases, accommodating China with a mutual logistics support arrangement may potentially entail reducing services to the United States utilizing Changi Naval Base and other Singaporean military resources. Of particular significance are the academic exchanges among think tanks, given the close ties these institutions in both Singapore and China maintain with their respective governments. Particularly in the case of Singapore, these think tanks wield considerable influence in shaping discourse surrounding Southeast Asia.

Again, contrast these minimal engagements with the extensive scope of Singapore–US cooperation. Between 2021 and 2022, as Singapore’s dialogue with China intensified, the Singapore signed an MOU with the United States concerning enhanced cyberspace defense cooperation, reaffirming “long-standing bilateral defense relations.”\(^{25}\) Additionally, approximately 25 percent of Singapore’s combat aircraft are stationed in the United States.\(^{26}\) In February 2023, the Singapore Ministry of Defense celebrated its acquisition of eight additional F-35B fighters from the United States.\(^{27}\) Perhaps of greatest significance is the fact that “The largest number of foreign troops in the continental US are from Singapore.”\(^{28}\) The multifaceted agreements between Singapore and the United States demonstrate considerable depth, with billions in armament exports to Singapore over the years and consistent mutual support for the militaries of both countries.\(^{29}\)


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Intelligence Exchange

Based on research from open-source materials, no evidence can be found regarding any form of intelligence exchanges between Singapore and the PRC. The only data uncovered related to intelligence exchange is a visit by Singapore’s Security and Intelligence Division (SID) to the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) in November 2019. The SID serves as Singapore’s equivalent to the American Central Intelligence Agency, while CIIS is a professional research institute administered by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

However, China does engage in intelligence sharing with ASEAN for counterterrorism cooperation and maritime security operations. Although specific details are not disclosed regarding whether there exists a direct exchange of intelligence between Singapore and the PRC, this suggests a potential avenue for future intelligence exchange within the counterterrorism domain between the two countries.

Another noteworthy piece of information on this topic stems from a 2013 article alleging that Singapore plays a pivotal role in assisting the United States and Australia in tapping into undersea telecommunications links across Asia. However, since the source originates from an allegedly leaked document by former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, the accuracy of the source cannot be verified. Nevertheless, if Singapore were indeed collaborating with the “Five Eyes” intelligence countries, it would rationalize the PRC’s reluctance to engage in direct intelligence exchanges with Singapore.

Professional Military Exchange

Professional military exchange typically involves the exchange of military officers to study at another country’s command or staff college. The precise size and frequency of exchanges between Singapore and China are unclear, but it is likely that the level of exchange between the two nations is minimal. China’s Naval University of Engineering includes Singapore as one of many stops for faculty and cadets aboard the Zhenghe Training Ship. In 2009, the People’s Liberation Army Air Force’s (PLAAF) Command College introduced specialty courses for foreign of-

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ficers and officers of the PLAAF. These courses enrolled no more than 70 students, and there is evidence of only one Singaporean officer attending any of these classes.

The SAF directly benefits from a substantial amount of training and equipment provided by the United States. In addition to extensive professional military exchange programs, such as command and staff colleges between the United States and Singapore, a notable number of SAF soldiers have completed training at US Army Airborne, Jumpmaster, and Pathfinder schools, as well as advanced courses such as the US Army Ranger school, Special Forces Qualification Course, and US Navy SEAL selection and training. In comparison to the exchanges between Singapore and the United States, professional military exchanges between Singapore and the PRC are limited in number, scope, and scale.

**Singapore’s Motivation**

Singapore maintains a closer alignment with the United States due to a lengthy history of defense cooperation. However, China represents a sizable and lucrative market that Singapore is hesitant to forgo by openly favoring the US. It is in Singapore’s best interest for both powers to engage in cooperation. Choosing to side exclusively with the United States would lead to the Lion City forfeiting access to Chinese markets and investment, diverting these resources to Singapore’s regional neighbors instead. Conversely, aligning solely with China would jeopardize the fundamental pillars of Singapore’s national defense.

As a city-state reliant on commerce, Singapore stands to gain the most when it can engage in unrestricted trade and investment without compromising its security or being drawn into great-power competition. Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing echoed this sentiment, affirming, “We want to connect in the new domains—to embrace integration and write and re-write the rules to ensure that all parties can benefit. . . . Balkanization and formation of isolated blocs will make it difficult for us to achieve both,” and stated that, “Great power rivalry and nativist politics have added isolationist pressure, threatening to reverse globalisation and the idea of cooperation and shared benefits. . . . The US-China trade tension has hurt the global economy.”

The United States’ revision of trade agreements from 2017 to 2021 coincided with domestic challenges. These factors, coupled with China’s rapid economic and

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industrial growth outpacing that of the West, prompted Singapore to enhance its ties with China. Minister for Defense Ng Eng Hen expressed Singapore’s concerns about US foreign policy during a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue, stating, “We can understand, even appreciate the underlying motivations but the implications are as troubling as they are unpredictable. . . . For the US, how does this shift to a new, more transactional foreign and security policy affect their acceptance by other nation states, friends, even allies?”

Ng questioned the extent to which the United States is prepared to assert its influence over China and highlighted the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a significant source of contention. He concluded by suggesting the repercussions of pressuring countries to align with one side or the other, stating, “Worse still is the situation where individual countries have to choose between the US or China. . . . That will be the ultimate losers’ game and a race to diminishing benefits for all concerned.”

To uphold neutrality and equilibrium between the great powers, Singapore refrains from aligning itself with the United States and, in certain instances, issues public statements challenging the United States. During a speech at the Reagan National Defense Forum in 2022, Dr. Ng urged the United States to “up its game in the economic sphere, whether it is in Asia or globally.” He reiterated Singapore’s disappointment with the United States’ decision not to join the TPP and emphasized, “And I would think that China is too big to ignore as a market.”

In the same year, Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong cautioned the United States that Singapore would not involve itself in any conflicts or disputes that the United States might become embroiled in. The Prime Minister also highlighted the TPP as a significant initiative for Singapore and a means to bolster the United States’ credibility in the region, but lamented, “However, US domestic politics render that unfeasible.” The heart of Singapore’s grievances lies primarily in economic matters rather than defensive concerns. Singapore’s gestures toward China serve to draw the attention of the United States.

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38 “Speech by Minister for Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, at the 6th Plenary on ‘Ensuring a Resilient and Stable Region’” (speech, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, 2 June 2019), https://www.mindef.gov.sg/.
39 “Speech by Minister for Defence, Dr Ng Eng Hen, at the 6th Plenary.”
41 Lan, “李显龙总理.”
Division between Singapore and the PRC

While the relationship between Singapore and the PRC seems relatively free of conflict, two notable points of contention arise: the SAF’s Project Starlight in Taiwan and the United States’ ability to utilize SAF Navy and Air Force bases in Singapore.

Project Starlight was initiated in 1975 when the newly independent Republic of Singapore sought a partner nation capable of providing training facilities for the SAF. Consequently, the SAF has dispatched up to 10,000 troops to Taiwan annually to conduct large-scale training exercises. This arrangement has been viewed as problematic by the PRC, and tensions between Singapore and China escalated in 2016 when nine SAF armored personnel carriers were seized by Hong Kong customs while returning from Taiwan. Although the armored personnel carriers were eventually released, this matter remains unresolved as the training continues annually in Taiwan.

Another source of contention between the two countries is the ongoing presence and activities of the United States military in Singapore. For instance, the Changi Naval Base is utilized by the US Navy for logistical and resupply missions for both the Indian Ocean fleets and the Pacific fleets, with agreements for installation use being regularly renewed.

Although the Chinese Ministry of Defense has not explicitly stated its stance on the matter, numerous pro-CCP scholars and news outlets in China have depicted these renewals as a threat to the PRC. They argue that such actions will empower the United States to intimidate China in the South China Sea and jeopardize the PRC’s maritime shipping. Chinese commentary asserts that Singapore’s cooperation in facilitating US Navy operations risks upsetting the fragile balance in the region and undermining existing cooperation between China and Singapore.

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46 Ma Yao, “马尧：新加坡给美战舰开后门，脑袋被门夹了吧 (Singapore opened the back door for the US warship, and his head was caught in the door),” Huanqiu, 20 October 2016, https://mil.huanqiu.com/.
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Implication

Regardless of Chinese overtures and pressure, the relationship between the United States and Singapore is overwhelmingly positive. Singapore’s Ministry of Defence news releases cautiously approach the topic of a bilateral relationship with China, but on the other hand, significant coverage is given to the large scope of coordination and support that characterizes Singapore’s ties to the United States.

Even amid the increase in exchanges with China, Dr. Ng reaffirms his country’s favorable stance toward the United States, asserting that “the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region was vital and virtuous.” Dr. Ng acknowledges in the same address that China’s aspirations for growth and power are understandable given historical circumstances, but he concludes by questioning, “Will an industrialized and strong China be as benign to Southeast Asia as the US has been since 1945?”

Singapore’s Minister of Foreign Affairs echoes Dr. Ng’s perspective, affirming that “Singapore has never shied from publicly articulating the value of a continued and sustained American presence in our region; . . . [for] we have viewed America as a benign hegemon, a positive force for good and we have been a beneficiary of this presence.”

The ongoing great-power rivalry between China and the United States has placed Singapore in a delicate position, unable to align definitively with either side. Singapore’s optimal strategy is to act as a mediator between the two powers and promote cooperation to mitigate potential losses. There is no apprehension about the US losing Singapore; rather, Singapore seeks to avoid losing favor with both the United States and China. Should conflict erupt, Singapore would fail to achieve its stated objectives. Nonetheless, despite tensions, Singapore maintains a positive outlook on the situation. Traditional strong ties with the United States are complemented by widespread public belief in China’s collaborative potential on the global stage.

However, Dr. Ng adopts a more cautious stance, remarking that “The temperature is not boiling, but certainly rising,” but admits that “pre-positioning for deter-

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49 “马尧：新加坡给美战舰开后门，脑袋被门夹了吧.”
rence is alive and well, but even then, the war drums have not started beating audibly."\textsuperscript{50}

In this context, the United States Department of Defense has no reason to be concerned about Singapore’s relationship with the PRC. While Singapore may adopt a stance of balancing and hedging for security reasons, its bond with the United States remains exceptionally robust and is expected to endure, particularly given Singapore’s unequivocal support for the United States and its reserved approach toward China.

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