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The Asia-Pacific and the United States 2004–2005

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Singapore and the United States 2004-2005: Steadfast Friends

A N T H O N Y L . S M I T H

K E Y F I N D I N G S

- The United States and Singapore are not, nor have they ever been, formal alliance partners. Yet the relationship with Singapore is the closest in political, diplomatic, commercial and military terms that America has in Southeast Asia. Although differences in opinion can be perceived there are no major controversies in what is largely a very even-keeled relationship.
- Singapore has always seen the U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific as crucial to its security and regional stability, and has sought to support that presence. Today, Singapore and Washington both view international terrorism as the pre-eminent security threat. Nonetheless, Singapore remains concerned that the U.S. reputation in Muslim communities in Southeast Asia and beyond has declined. Singapore has argued that a solution to the Palestine issue would mitigate a major grievance in the Muslim world.
- The United States and Singapore have forged agreements for substantive cooperation. The U.S. Navy has a headquarters in Singapore and approximately one hundred U.S. ship visits per year are facilitated out of that office. Singapore has also joined the Container Security Initiative (CSI) and the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Commercial interaction between the two countries is significant, and the two have signed a far-reaching Free Trade Agreement, America's first with a country in Asia. The two countries are also in the midst of negotiating the Singapore-U.S. Strategic Framework Agreement on defense ties.
- Differences in political structure mean that the United States and Singapore still do not see eye-to-eye on human rights issues but the relationship has changed since the 1990s, when a lively debate occurred between the two countries about appropriate forms of government in Asia. The U.S. State Department continues to cite a lack of political freedom in Singapore, but differences on this front do not impede economic, political and security cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2004 at the annual International Institute for Strategic Studies conference in Singapore (also known as the Shangri-La Dialogue), Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld acknowledged “our steadfast friends here in Singapore” in the context of facing terrorism and other security challenges. Although he was engaging in customary praise for one’s host, the reality is that the United States has come to see Singapore as a vital partner. The United States and Singapore have never been formal allies since Singapore became an independent state in 1965, yet the relationship is at least as close as that of a number of formal alliance partners such as Thailand and the Philippines. The relationship with Singapore is the most substantial and multi-faceted relationship that the United States has with any Southeast Asian country. A point of continuity in the relationship, spanning the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, is Singapore’s stated desire to keep the United States engaged in the Asia-Pacific region. Referring to America’s global role, Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong, (then Deputy Prime Minister and now Prime Minister) told the Williamsburg Conference in 2000 that “no other country can substitute for the U.S.” Singapore has not become a formal alliance partner out of consideration for its immediate neighbors. Singapore has, in its diplomatic history, taken care not to alarm the surrounding countries of Indonesia and Malaysia, for whom a formal alliance with the United States may seem threatening. Equally, Singapore is also mindful of its own domestic population. The Chinese-language press in Singapore, for example, often displays highly critical views of the U.S., which presumably finds fertile ground with a number of ethnic Chinese “heartlanders.”

Nonetheless, Singapore is an ardent supporter of the war on international terrorist groups, both in Southeast Asia and in the wider world, largely because Singapore sees *jihadi* groups as its prime security threat—a worldview it shares with Washington. Singapore was one of only two Southeast Asian countries (the other being the Philippines) to support the American-led invasion of Iraq—overriding Singapore’s own stated concern that war in Iraq would harm America’s image among Southeast Asia’s Muslims. Singapore has also contributed transport planes as part of a small force that has joined Operation Iraqi Freedom. The year 2004 saw further solidification of an already substantial relationship. In contrast to some of America’s other relationships in Southeast Asia, there was little in the way of controversy in the U.S.-Singapore relationship during the year.

THE WAR ON TERRORISM

There is ongoing Singapore-U.S. cooperation on a number of levels to confront the terrorism problem. Singapore believes that it has effectively destroyed any terrorist threat inside its territory, but still sees itself as vulnerable to regional developments and potential external infiltration. Dr. Tony Tan Keng Yam, Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence, has called Singapore an “iconic target” for Islamist terrorist groups. During former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s visit to Washington in 2004 he said during a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations that the threat of Islamic terrorism is not only “most dangerous” but worse than the communist

threat that Singapore and the Malayan Peninsula faced in the immediate post-war period: “The communists fought to live, whereas the jihadi terrorists fight to die, and live in the next world.” *Al-Qaeda*’s attacks on America on September 11, 2001, were as much a shock for Singapore as they were for the rest of the world, but the discovery of an *al-Qaeda*-affiliated grouping called *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) operating throughout Southeast Asia was even more alarming for Singapore. In December 2001, Singapore (and Malaysia) arrested the first of a number of JI members, who were accused of plotting to bomb various targets around the island. More arrests came later. Singapore also responded by “hardening” its infrastructure security and restructuring its intelligence apparatus during 2004 to reflect the fact that the JI threat is transnational (i.e., domestic and regional) in nature. During the year the Singapore government released a document that detailed these changes titled *The Fight Against Terror: Singapore’s National Security Strategy* (Singapore: National Security Coordination Centre, 2004). This document makes it clear that Singapore views the modern terrorist threat posed by *jihadi* groups as being far more profound and sustained than anything seen in the past.

In practice, too, Singapore defines the terrorism problem much the same way the United States does (in contrast to the different perspectives of Singapore’s neighbors). Singapore has designed JI a terrorist group, something Indonesia is yet to do. Although Singaporean officials routinely note Washington’s failure to fully comprehend opinions on the Arab street, the Singapore government has talked tough on the ideological underpinnings of terrorism—perhaps even going further than Washington is prepared to go. Both Singapore and Washington have stressed that the war on terrorism should not be seen as a war on Islam, and that Islam is an inherently peaceful faith. Yet Singaporean leaders have spoken regularly of growing levels of religious fundamentalism in Southeast Asia as the recruiting pool for JI and other *jihadi* groups. During Goh’s visit to Washington he warned that the *Salafi* variant of Islam was gaining ground in Southeast Asia. According to Goh, *Salafi* Islam promotes the idea of an Islamic state and defines the Islamic commitment to *jihad* as a “holy war” against unbelievers. U.S. leaders have, in rhetorical terms, not engaged in this type of specific commentary, or identified a particular sect or variant of Islam as the problem.

The Singaporean government sees the U.S. role in Southeast Asia as critical in confronting terrorism. Singapore lobbies Washington to do considerably more in Southeast Asia, through an extended force presence and through wider engagement with the Indonesian military (TNI) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Singapore argues that engaging the TNI is the best way to counter terrorism and stabilize Indonesia, which would find favor in the Bush administration but has often met resistance in Congress. Singapore urged Washington not to punish the Philippines when that country suddenly pulled its troops out of Iraq over a hostage situation during 2004. (Washington opted not to make an example out of the Philippines in any event.) Singapore argues that the Philippines needs U.S. aid and assistance in order to shore up that country’s ability to rein in terrorist cells. But Singaporean officials also argue that the United States has failed to win the hearts and minds of Muslims in Southeast Asia generally, and cite the failure to settle or resolve the Palestinian issue as a leading example—an echo of Malaysia’s criticism. Goh, in his speech to the Council of Foreign Relations, bluntly told his American audience that while U.S. military power was crucial in the war on terror, “the US cannot lead the ideological battle.” Goh noted that the reasons for Muslim anger

toward the United States are “complex” in nature but again stressed Palestine as one of the leading issues that undermines Washington’s influence. Goh repeated this message at the 2004 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

For Singapore, as for the Bush Administration, the war on terror involves the conventional war operations in not just Afghanistan, but Iraq too. Singapore offered its support to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Furthermore, Singapore allowed U.S. armed forces to transit through Singapore on the way to operations to Iraq, as it had done with regard to operations in Afghanistan. Singapore has also provided a modest contribution to the war in Iraq, with, amongst other things, the provision of police trainers and some transport aircraft.

WIDER COOPERATION WITH THE UNITED STATES

Reflective of the strength of the relationship is the regular high-level bilateral exchanges that take place between the U.S. and Singapore. For example, Goh’s Washington visit during 2004 included an audience with President Bush. Dr. Tan also visited the United States. Rumsfeld, at an April 21, 2004, joint press briefing with Dr. Tan, spoke of Singapore’s contribution to the war on terrorism as also involving “sharing intelligence.”

During 2004, Dr. Tan proposed that Singapore, Malaysia, and the United States jointly patrol the pirate-plagued waters of the Malacca Straits, but the suggestion did not find fertile ground with Singapore’s immediate neighbors. The Malaysian government immediately moved to reject the idea that U.S. marines would be involved in active patrols. Malaysia argued that an overt U.S. military role would create dissatisfaction within Southeast Asia and give terrorist groups more targets. Both Indonesia and Malaysia also reacted strongly when Admiral Thomas Fargo, Commander of the Pacific Command (PACOM), was misreported during the year as suggesting that U.S. forces might become active in patrolling the Malacca Straits as part of the proposed Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI), a suggestion that a number of U.S. officials, including Mr. Rumsfeld, denied. The incident demonstrates that Singapore clearly has no difficulty with a U.S. presence in Singapore, or even a U.S. military role in Southeast Asia. Malaysia’s objection, and Singapore’s quiet withdrawal of the idea, demonstrates the regional constraints that Singapore faces in linking with the United States.

However, the United States and Singapore have found room for a great deal of cooperation in other respects. During 2004 the two countries continued to negotiate the Singapore-U.S. Strategic Framework Agreement, which will further define defense and security ties—although the exact details are not yet public. Frank Lavin, U.S. Ambassador to Singapore, has defined this Framework Agreement not as a formal defense alliance, but as an agreement that will facilitate greater cooperation in terms of joint exercises. These joint exercises, according to the ambassador, will be conducted with a view to countering immediate regional threats, or cooperation on future UN peacekeeping operations, such as Singapore’s contribution to the multilateral force in East Timor. The signing of an agreement is also likely to facilitate Singaporean access to U.S. defense technology.

During 2003 Singapore agreed to be part of an informal coalition supporting the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), designed to stem the illegal transport of nuclear material. That same year Singapore also signed on to an agreement with the U.S. Customs

Service known as the Container Security Initiative (CSI), which allows U.S. Customs agents to “pre-inspect” shipments destined for the United States. Singapore and the United States continue to negotiate on ways and means to stem the possible shipment of illegal cargoes through Singapore, although there is still no full agreement on this. These negotiations between the U.S. and Singapore, over the years, have revolved around better inspections of ports and maritime traffic, which Singapore has traditionally been loathe to interfere with in order to maintain efficiency on its docks.

In line with its generally tight control over civil society, Singapore keeps a close watch on private charities and non-governmental organizations, but there is still disagreement between the U.S. and Singapore about the control of potential terrorist finances. To bolster its reputation as the regional commercial entrepôt, Singapore has financial secrecy laws under which foreign currency exchanges are not required to be reported. As a result, the United States and Singapore do not share financial records, although there have been negotiations over a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) that might facilitate this. American officials may well conclude that despite Singapore’s very real concern over the terrorist problem, Singapore is often mindful of not disrupting its economy.

U.S. FORCES IN SINGAPORE/SOUTHEAST ASIA

Not only is Singapore supportive of a U.S. role in the Asia Pacific, but it is prepared to give the United States facility access for reasons of diplomatic convergence and the financial spin-offs that such visits generate. In 1990, amid fears of U.S. downsizing in Southeast Asia and the uncertain future of U.S. bases in the Philippines, Washington and Singapore signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) giving U.S. armed forces access to Singapore’s naval and air facilities. In 1992, when the decision to leave the Philippines came into effect, the United States Navy (USN) relocated to Singapore the Commander, Logistics Group, Western Pacific (COMLOG WESTPAC). COMLOG WESTPAC supports the U.S. Seventh Fleet, coordinating U.S. Navy exercises throughout Southeast Asia. This includes the approximately one hundred annual ship visits to Singapore itself. In 1998 Singapore gave the United States access to its deep water pier at the Changi Naval Base, which was completed in 2000, allowing the U.S. Navy to bring in aircraft carriers. Singapore also buys most of its defense equipment from the United States, of which it is a considerable customer, and is allowed to station its Apache AH-64D helicopters in Arizona for its training detachment.

This security arrangement with the United States serves Singapore’s interests in a number of ways. Singapore clearly views American forces as a stabilizing presence in the region and was keen to pick up the slack after the closure of U.S. bases in the Philippines in order to maintain the status quo. Even in the absence of an alliance, the presence of considerable U.S. defense assets in Singapore provides some value to Singapore’s own defense. The military relationship also has tangible materiel benefits for Singapore’s own high-tech armed forces, which rely on advanced U.S. equipment. Singapore, for example, is the only country in Asia that has joined the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program. Military-to-military ties with the United States—and the regular visits that they involve, also pour a good deal of money into Singapore’s economy—although this must be considered a secondary reason for the military relationship.

COMMERCIAL LINKS

In 2003 the U.S. and Singapore signed the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (USSFTA) to reduce or eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers, remove barriers to service-sector trade, and enhance intellectual property rights protection. The agreement came into being on January 1, 2004. This Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is significant not only in its breadth, but the fact that it is the first such American agreement with any Asian country. Singapore, being unencumbered by agricultural exports (with a few minor exceptions), allowed passage of a more comprehensive FTA than otherwise might have been the case. It is more far reaching than Australia's agreement with the United States, which excluded a number of agricultural products. During 2004 the two countries signed the Bilateral Aviation Safety Agreement (BASA), which allows aerospace companies in both countries to take advantage of the mutual recognition of industry standards (i.e., if one country accepts a particular standard, then it can be considered approved in the other).

In export terms, Malaysia ranks above Singapore as an export destination for the United States. However, if one factors in investment, the service sector and intangibles trade and other forms of foreign exchange earnings, Singapore's importance is greater than a glance at commodity trade suggests. Two-way trade with Singapore in 2002 was \$31 billion. Of this, \$12 billion represents U.S. exports, which means a healthy trade surplus for Singapore. Total U.S. cumulative investment in Singapore stands at around \$25 billion. Singapore remains a natural headquarters for U.S. companies seeking to enter regional markets.

SINGAPORE'S DOMESTIC POLITICS AS A BILATERAL ISSUE

Agreement in a range of foreign policy areas has not always translated into agreement on domestic politics. During the 1990s, Singapore, largely through the person of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, robustly defended "Asian values" democracy in the face of Western (and U.S.) support for the spread of liberal democracy throughout Asia. This difference of opinion did not just play out at the level of intellectual debate. Singapore expelled an American diplomat, E. Mason Hendrickson, for contact with opposition figure Francis Seow and general "interference" in Singapore domestic politics. (Francis Seow was jailed in 1987, and subsequently bankrupted after standing for election in 1998. He left Singapore and now lives abroad.) The U.S. Embassy has continued to maintain contact with opposition parties, but the U.S. and Singapore, both self-professed democracies, differ over its practice. Agreement on broader strategic issues does not change this fact. The U.S. State Department, in its annual human rights reports, finds that Singapore's judiciary is not wholly independent of the ruling party and that the courts are often used against political opponents. While noting that Singapore largely respects human rights, the 2003 report also noted the Singaporean government's penchant to limit freedoms and "handicap political opposition." It is a fair assessment that Washington, while still monitoring Singapore's lack of democratic space, has not allowed this issue to interfere with the broader bilateral relationship—particularly during the war on terrorism. Nonetheless, those very real political differences remain.

CONCLUSION

Developments in 2004 confirmed existing trends in the U.S.-Singapore relationship. It is a relationship that continued without controversy. It is a very close partnership in diplomatic, political, military and economic terms, yet Singapore has not sought, and will not seek, a formal military alliance arrangement with the United States. Singapore is mindful of its immediate neighborhood and its own domestic population. A formal alliance tie-up is not seen by Singapore as conferring any advantages that cannot be achieved through already substantial bilateral engagement. Singapore shares with the United States a convergence of interests at the macro level, which has facilitated such close cooperation. Given the policy convergence between the two countries, the United States and Singapore will continue to maintain their partnership. And although the details are still to be hammered out, the Singapore-U.S. Strategic Framework Agreement, once signed, will be a signal of closer cooperation.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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