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The future of the security relationship between Singapore and Australia

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FEBRUARY 2017

VICE CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE
Australian Defence College
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Abstract

This paper addresses the future of the security relationship between Singapore and Australia. It notes that while there are obvious differences in physical geography, as well as identity and culture, the strategic partnership between the two countries—based on a shared history, common interests in politics, economics and regional security, and consistency in relations—has created opportunities for both to gravitate closer together, particularly over the past decade or so.

The paper asserts that Singapore's current and planned level of military training in Australia is indicative of the close relationship. However, it contends that bilateral policy options in humanitarian disaster-relief, the Middle East and the South China Sea have the potential not only to develop a broader and deeper partnership for mutual benefit but could also nurture confidence-building behaviour with China and the US that could usefully build and sustain regional security and stability.

The future of the security relationship between Singapore and Australia

Introduction

On 18 August 1965, nine days after Singapore became independent from the Federation of Malaysia, Australia's Prime Minister Robert Menzies released a press statement recognising the state of Singapore.¹ In doing so, Australia became the first country to establish diplomatic relations with the island nation-state. Moving forward almost 50 years, Prime Ministers Lee Hsien Loong and Tony Abbott on 29 June 2015 agreed to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Singapore and Australia.² Less than a year later, both governments continued the momentum with an announcement in early May 2016 outlining a swathe of diplomatic, cultural, military and economic agreements.³

Prime Minister Lee highlighted that the May 2016 announcement was a 'landmark agreement' that would 'cement relations and benefit Australians and Singaporeans for years to come'.⁴ In parallel, Lee's new counterpart, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, described the partnership as a 'massive upgrading' in relations and added that he intended to enhance the relationship to a level similar to that which Australia enjoys with New Zealand.⁵ This series of negotiations culminated in Prime Minister Lee's visit to Canberra in October 2016 to finalise four important agreements, signalling the start of the first tranche of initiatives under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁶

During the announcement of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2015, Prime Minister Abbott had asserted that Australia and Singapore were natural and complementary partners, commenting that both countries share characteristics such as 'the English language, the rule of law, a high and rising standard of living, and support for the US-backed global order' and that Singapore's desire to expand globally matched Australia's need for investment from Asia.⁷ When Prime Minister Lee announced the partnership in 2016, he remarked that:

[O]ur two countries are politically like-minded, strategically-aligned and economically complementary. We have much to gain by working closely together. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will draw our two countries closer, economically, politically and at the people-to-people level.⁸

Besides those similarities, Australia and Singapore share a British colonial heritage and a shared history exemplified by the sacrifice of Australian soldiers in defence of Singapore during World War 2. After recognising Singapore in 1965, Australia agreed to be part of the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA) in 1971. Canberra provided military aid under the Defence Cooperation Program, acting as a quasi-guarantor for the nascent nation-state's security, buttressing it after *Konfrontasi* with Indonesia between 1962 and 1966, and after the British withdrew east of Suez in 1968.⁹ The British withdrawal was traumatising for Singapore and ingrained into the national psyche the need to establish 'self-reliant armed forces capable of independent deterrence'.¹⁰

Formal defence relations were initiated between Australia and Singapore when the two countries agreed to a status-of-forces agreement in February 1988.¹¹ Exercise WALLABY was first conducted by 1200 Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) personnel at the Shoalwater Bay training area in October 1990. In August 2005, a memorandum of agreement was signed at the Defence Minister-level to increase the SAF's footprint in Australia to 6600 troops.¹² In March 1993, the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) signed a memorandum of understanding with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) to establish the No. 130 Squadron flying training detachment at RAAF Base Pearce.¹³

Since 1993, this has expanded to flying training at the Air Grading Centre in Tamworth, a KC-135 detachment at Amberley, regular training for F-16s and F-15s at Tindal and Williamstown, a Super Puma helicopter detachment at the Oakey Training Centre in Queensland, and joint

exercises such as Exercise PITCH BLACK.¹⁴ Similarly, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) and Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) train and operate regularly together, such as the biannual Exercise KAKADU in Darwin and Combined Task Force 151, a multinational counter-piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden.

At the joint level, both the SAF and Australian Defence Force (ADF) train together as part of Exercise TRIDENT, an amphibious drill conducted in Queensland.¹⁵ The ADF has also deployed an officer from the RAN to operate as an international liaison officer at the Information Fusion Centre in Changi Naval Base in Singapore.¹⁶ In addition to their participation in Combined Task Force 151, both armed forces regularly cooperate in other operational-level areas such as multinational reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In August 2008, Australia and Singapore reinforced their security relationship when both countries agreed to a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation at the Prime Minister-level.¹⁷ Building on the already strong military relationship, it outlined policy dialogues, military cooperation and defence technology cooperation as three critical areas to reinforce the strength and depth of the existing security policy cooperation. Presently, Australia and Singapore work together regularly at multilateral forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus. Both countries are also working together as the current co-chairs of ASEAN's Counter-Terrorism Experts' Working Group.

The uniquely broad spectrum of large-scale unilateral training of the SAF within Australia reflects the trust and understanding underpinning the close relationship between Canberra and Singapore. The complexity of sophisticated combined training, operational cooperation in the Middle East, and a broad spectrum of dialogue and defence technology cooperation is a reflection of the high level of integration and partnership between the respective Defence institutions and, in particular, between the ADF and SAF.

This blossoming security partnership is growing as China-US rivalry becomes more tense, particularly in the South China Sea, with Southeast Asia becoming a proxy for the global rivalry between China and the US. This rivalry presents a conundrum for Australia and Singapore. As economic powers in the Asia-Pacific region, with a common desire for a rules-based global order, Australia and Singapore strongly support the US as guarantor of security within the region, a system which has consistently fostered regional peace and prosperity since World War 2.¹⁸ However, both countries will need to manage a delicate balancing act in supporting the US while maintaining a dependence on China as their biggest trading partner.

Given the context of the increasingly close relationship between Australia and Singapore, this paper will analyse the future of the partnership beyond the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, examining the security relationship in light of increased China-US rivalry in Southeast Asia. It will be presented in seven parts. Following the introduction, the second part examines the strategic importance of Southeast Asia to Australia, Singapore, China and the US. The third part outlines the nature of China-US rivalry within Southeast Asia and its impact on Australia and Singapore. The next will explore the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership blueprint, articulating the agreement's broad range of initiatives with a focus on defence and security.

Part 5 of the paper will explore the post-Comprehensive Strategic Partnership security relationship for Australia and Singapore, and present possible policy options within the context of the regional rivalry between China and the US. Before concluding, the paper will articulate future challenges that can potentially impact on relations between both countries. Finally, it will argue that given similarities in the strategic calculus of both countries, reinforced with the introduction of several policy options, the partnership will continue to be resilient over the next decade.

Part 1: Strategic context

Southeast Asia is situated east of the Indian subcontinent, south of China and north of Australia, between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Based on the definition articulated by the Bangkok Treaty for a Southeast Asian nuclear-weapon free zone, the region consists of two different geographic regions, namely mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, the latter covering the continental shelves and exclusive economic zones of countries within the zone (See Figure 1).¹⁹ Mainland Southeast Asia comprises Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and peninsular Malaysia. Maritime Southeast Asia includes Indonesia, East Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Timor-Leste and Brunei. Except for Timor-Leste, the other ten countries of Southeast Asia are members of ASEAN.



Figure 1: Map of Southeast Asia²⁰
(showing both land and sea territories)

Singapore sits at the nexus of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. It is a tiny island nation-state of about 720 square kilometres, situated between the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea. Since its founding in 1819, the island has leveraged its geography at the heart of Southeast Asia and astride vital sea lines of communication. As a market economy heavily dependent on regional trade, the peace and security of the Straits of Malacca, South China Sea and Southeast Asia have been key to Singapore's survival and prosperity.

In a similar vein, China and the US have also recognised and valued Singapore's geostrategic location throughout the island's history. In 2013, the value of US foreign direct investment in Singapore was US\$138.6 billion, constituting almost 70 per cent of total US investment in ASEAN.²¹ China's foreign direct investment in Singapore was about US\$12.0 billion in 2013 (8.5 per cent of US investment in Singapore) but projected to grow significantly over the next decade.²²

Prized and competed over since the 15th century, both the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea will remain a major focus of regional powers for the foreseeable future. The confluence of the Straits of Malacca, Singapore and the South China Sea forms the shortest shipping channel between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, linking Europe, the Middle East and South Asia to the Asia-Pacific. This geostrategic chokepoint has become one of the most important trading routes in the world from both an economic and a strategic perspective. More than 50 per cent of the

world's annual merchant fleet tonnage traverses these waterways, as does 30 per cent of international maritime traffic.²³

In 2013, about 15.2 million barrels of oil a day passed through the Straits of Malacca to the South China Sea, a figure that was second only to the volume of oil transiting the Straits of Hormuz (at the head of the Persian Gulf). However, in terms of the total volume of goods and hydrocarbons, the Straits of Malacca would be regarded as the world's busiest and most vital waterway. In particular, approximately 80 per cent of China's crude oil imports and over 90 per cent of Australia's refined petroleum products traverse this route.²⁴ Also, the South China Sea has been assessed to contain natural gas and oil reserves forecast at an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet and seven billion barrels respectively.²⁵ Besides hydrocarbons, the area contains critically important fishing grounds.

Australia's *2016 Defence White Paper* mentions Southeast Asia 43 times and identifies it as a 'strategic defence interest in a secure nearer region'.²⁶ As its second strategic defence objective, the paper outlines the need to support the security of maritime Southeast Asia.²⁷ Since the end of World War 2—and particularly following the withdrawal of UK forces east of Suez from 1968—the region has increasingly become more important to Australia's defence and economic security, especially since Canberra has assessed that this is the possible area through which any contemporary military or terrorist threat would emanate.²⁸

Euan Graham contends that particularly within the context of Australia's continued participation in FPDA, there has been an implicit understanding that Canberra would directly support the defence of peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, in alignment with a forward defence strategy of 'holding the Malay barrier'.²⁹ However, the geographical restrictions of FPDA limit the agreement to peninsular Malaysia and do not include East Malaysia, which is the territorial basis for Kuala Lumpur's claims in the South China Sea. However, all five FPDA members continue to conduct major exercises in the South China Sea, such as Exercise BERSAMA SHIELD 2016.³⁰

The *2016 Defence White Paper* also recommends sustaining cooperation with Australia's neighbours, notably with Singapore as its 'most advanced partner in Southeast Asia', to maintain a secure maritime trading environment.³¹ Reinforcing the importance of the region, Australia's total trade with ASEAN countries was over A\$100 billion in 2014.³² Almost two-thirds of Australia's exports pass through Southeast Asia, heading to its three largest export markets in China, Japan and South Korea.³³ ASEAN and by extension Southeast Asia have also been key to Singapore's economy and security.

In 2013, Singapore's total intra- and extra-ASEAN trade in 2013 amounted to US\$783.27 billion, more than double its GDP in that year.³⁴ Almost one-third or 31.4 per cent of total exports and 21 per cent of imports in 2013 were from countries in ASEAN. Singapore's immediate region has also been described by its government as 'increasingly complex and volatile', with tensions in the South China Sea, terrorism and cyber attacks identified as the main threats to the nation's security.³⁵

However, Singapore's geostrategic location within Southeast Asia is a double-edged sword, as it also provides a convenient transit hub for militants between countries within ASEAN and other parts of the world.³⁶ As outlined in the *2016 Defence White Paper*, Australia appears aligned with Singapore's regional threat perceptions, identifying the South China Sea, terrorism, cyber and space as 'points of friction within the region'.³⁷

Part 2: Regional China-US rivalry

Malcolm Cook argues that the current Asia-Pacific security environment appears strikingly similar to one before World War 2, where a US-dominated regional order is coming under increasing pressure from a rising Asian power.³⁸ After more than 70 years, it is again a rising Asian power from Northeast Asia that is seeking to reorder the balance of power within the Asia-Pacific. The implication for Southeast Asia is that it is now entering into a new era of strategic rivalry, transiting from a World War 2 divide between Japan and the US to a Cold War polarity

between the Soviet Union and the US, to one which increasingly appears to position a rising China against the US.

In 2011, the US initiated a multifaceted diplomatic, economic and military 'pivot' to enhance its commitment to Asia and to adjust to the rise of China. As outlined by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in October 2011:

As the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point. Over the last ten years, we have allocated immense resources to those two theaters. In the next ten years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values. One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will, therefore, be to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region.³⁹

However, from a Chinese lens, the pivot was orchestrated to constrain China, limit its ability to project power, and preserve US hegemony and influence within the region. Beijing views Washington's pivot as an aggressive rebalance to thwart China's growing aspirations in Asia and, in particular, in the South China Sea.⁴⁰ Since 2010, the territorial, maritime boundary and jurisdictional disputes between China and competing claimants to the Spratly and Paracel Islands, as well as Scarborough Shoal, in the South China Sea have escalated. On the basis of a 'nine-dash-line' map from 1947 produced by the Kuomintang government, China has staked the largest overall claim to geographic features within the South China Sea.⁴¹ Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, China and Malaysia are contesting the approximately 740 reefs, islets, atolls and islands of the Spratlys.⁴²

All these countries, except Brunei, have established outposts on more than 60 geographic features in the Spratlys. China, Vietnam and Taiwan contest the Paracel Islands, and Manila is challenging Beijing's claims to Scarborough Shoal. Other claimants, four of which are ASEAN member countries, including one which a treaty ally of the US (the Philippines), dispute Beijing's basis of historical usage for these claims. The other claimants also argue that Beijing's assertions lack a legal foundation under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

The US, for its part, acknowledges China's ambitions and sees Beijing's efforts as a challenge to its influence within the Asia-Pacific, defined as the region covering Asia, Oceania and the South Pacific.⁴³ Although it is not a claimant, the US has contested the legality of this historical claim and China's aggressive pre-emptive approach to securing its interests in the South China Sea. Since October 2015, the US has conducted four so-called 'freedom of navigation operations' with US Navy ships in a direct challenge to China's territorial claims, manoeuvring within 12 nautical miles of Chinese-occupied geographical features in the South China Sea.⁴⁴

These disputes seem likely to escalate further after China refused to accept the ruling of an arbitration tribunal at The Hague in July 2016, which found that China's 'historic rights' claim to resources within the nine-dash line were not compatible with UNCLOS. Also, Beijing stated that it would ignore the legally binding ruling and instead seek to defend its interests. Concurrently, Beijing has also threatened to declare an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) above the South China Sea, as it has already done in the East China Sea.⁴⁵

From a Chinese viewpoint, given its growing global military and economic stature, it appears that other great powers are impeding and frustrating its attempts to achieve its national objectives. Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis define China's three inter-related national objectives as being to control the periphery and ward off threats to the ruling regime; to preserve domestic order and well-being in the face of different forms of social strife; and to attain or maintain geopolitical influence as a major, or even primary, state.⁴⁶ They assess that these national objectives are part of a calculative strategy to secure China and its immediate region to sustain economic prosperity, maintain regime legitimacy and enhance its international standing.

By extension, this nationalist strategy to secure China's nearer region would include Beijing's claims to the South China Sea. From a strategic military perspective, China understands the critical need to secure the South China Sea to facilitate power projection of its armed forces and

to act as a sanctuary for its undersea nuclear arm. Located at the south-eastern tip of Hainan Island, China's new Longpo naval base for its nuclear-strike capable ballistic-missile submarines is strategically positioned to facilitate the exit of these high-value assets directly into sanctuaries within the South China Sea.⁴⁷ Reclamation of island features and the establishment of runways, logistical support facilities and air defences strengthen China's control of this zone and enhance the survivability of its submarine-based retaliatory nuclear-strike capability.⁴⁸

Besides the US, Beijing has also stymied diplomatic efforts by ASEAN to conflict manage the South China Sea dispute multilaterally through dialogue and consultation, where there are overlapping claims to features between China and three ASEAN members; the Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam.⁴⁹ In early September 2016, ASEAN leaders met in Laos for the first time since the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling, with the summit's closing statement making no mention of China or the regional territorial dispute, only stating that ASEAN continued to be 'seriously concerned over recent and ongoing developments and took note of the concerns expressed by some leaders'.⁵⁰

The relatively mild statement by ASEAN is an indication of the challenge that it faces in achieving its characteristic consensus in decision making, a vulnerability that China has exploited. Laos, the ASEAN chair during the summit, and Cambodia have close relations with China, with Cambodia coincidentally announcing that it would be receiving more than half a billion dollars in aid from China.⁵¹

Impact on Australia and Singapore

Australia and Singapore have been drawn into the South China Sea dispute between Beijing and Washington even though they have no territorial claims to the region. As it attempts to balance the two competing interests of their first- and third-largest trading partners, being China and US respectively, Australia as a treaty ally of the US and Singapore will have to manoeuvre between the competing interests of Beijing and Washington.

Australia's foreign policy approach with China has been and is likely to continue to be influenced and constrained by the Australia-New Zealand-US (ANZUS) alliance. The late former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser described the alliance and 'strategic dependence' on the US as a burden.⁵² Australia's close association with the US has also earned Canberra the moniker within the region of 'deputy sheriff' to the US.⁵³

Hugh White describes the situation for Australia as 'the first time in our history where our biggest trading partner is a strategic rival of our principal ally, so this introduces a whole level of complexity into our strategic situation we have never known as a country before'.⁵⁴ As Peter Grete notes, 'the problem for us is the historical forces driving each of them are far greater than anything we can control, so we need to find out how those forces might play out'.⁵⁵ The situation for Australia is complicated by competing demands from the US to support freedom of navigation operations and what appear to be warnings by China to 'act appropriately' in the South China Sea.⁵⁶

For example, in February 2016, Commander US 7th Fleet, Vice Admiral Aucoin, said it would be 'valuable' for Australia to conduct freedom of navigation operations within the 12 nautical mile limits around contested features in the South China Sea.⁵⁷ This statement was significant as it was assessed to be the first time that a senior US official had publicly advanced such an escalatory course of action for Australia.⁵⁸ In the Australian Parliament, where the Turnbull Government has a razor-thin majority of one seat, the opposition supports the US position and has called for efforts to 'challenge bullying China', including by conducting freedom of navigation operations in and over contested waters.⁵⁹

In October 2016, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop articulated the Government's position and attempted a delicate manoeuvre between Beijing and Washington, stating that:

[T]he US had never asked Australia to take part in exercises that would go within disputed territorial waters ... and we will continue to do what we have always done, and that is traverse

the South China Sea, exercising our rights of passage over water, [and] through the skies... Australia has been carrying out operations in the South China Sea for many years and will continue to do so.⁶⁰

By asserting that Australia's behaviour has been consistent 'for many years' and by caveating that it will 'continue to do so' but without necessarily venturing into disputed territory, Bishop has outlined actions that reflect an independent course of foreign policy action while cognisant that Canberra has to tread carefully with both Beijing and Washington. However, this has not prevented Australia from being cautioned by Beijing on conducting surveillance missions within the contested region and allegedly supporting US freedom of navigation operations.⁶¹

The *Global Times*, a subsidiary of the *People's Daily*, the main propaganda media outlet for the Chinese Communist Party, stated that China should fire on any Australian vessel participating in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, warning that 'if Australia steps into the South China Sea waters, it will be an ideal target for China to warn and strike'.⁶² It added that Australia is demonstrating 'double standards' in seeking to claim territory in the Antarctic but challenging China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. In October 2016, the Vice-Chairman of China's Central Military Commission, Fan Changlong, told Australia's Chief of the Defence Force that China 'hopes that on the South China Sea issue, the Australian side can speak and act cautiously and that its words and deeds match'.⁶³

Since independence, Singapore's perception of its vulnerability as a small island nation-state has necessitated the adoption of an omnidirectional approach to international relations, engaging all the great powers without committing to any alliance, other than FPDA (which is only a commitment by the other member states to consult in the event of an armed attack on Singapore or Malaysia).⁶⁴ This policy approach enables Singapore to preserve autonomy in international relations while maintaining the best possible relations with all the major powers, at the same time engaging all interested parties to invest and commit to a share in its prosperity.

For example, Singapore maintains close security ties with the US and other countries as diverse as Australia, Brunei, France, Germany, India, Israel, South Africa, Sweden, Taiwan, Thailand and the UK. Graham explains that these close defence ties have the effect of buttressing the security of a small state by anchoring a web of friendly powers to Singapore, which would complicate the strategic calculus of potential aggressors:

Those countries that host Singapore defence assets provide strategic depth, in a physical sense, given Singapore's space constraints. Others lend diplomatic diversity, if not redundancy, designed to maximise Singapore's options, thus avoiding the patron-client trap of less proactive small states.⁶⁵

The situation in the region facing Singapore mirrors the challenges in the relationship between Australia, China and the US. Singapore also does not have any claim to features in the South China Sea and, like Australia, does not take any sides on the territorial claims. At the same time, like Australia, Singapore shares close ties with the US although it is not a treaty ally. Ties between Singapore and the US have grown since the signing of a memorandum of understanding in 1990, with the conduct of annual strategic partnership dialogues and the forward deployment of US Navy littoral combat ships at Changi naval base.⁶⁶

In August 2016, Prime Minister Lee stated that although Singapore is not a claimant, 'in other ways, we do have a lot at stake and three things matter to us, international law, freedom of navigation and a united ASEAN'.⁶⁷ Respect and adherence to international law by all countries and a rules-based global order are of critical interest to small countries like Singapore. Within an environment where there are modern examples of bigger powers not complying with global norms of state behaviour, such as Russian actions against Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, Lee made clear that Singapore cannot 'cannot afford to have international relations work on the basis that might is right. If rules do not matter, then small countries like Singapore have no chance of survival'.⁶⁸

The second concern is that the two vital lifelines through the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca are fundamental to the survival of the island state. Since its founding, it has been in

Singapore's existential interest that freedom of navigation of commerce through these two sea lines of communication remains unaffected by disputes within the region, including the South China Sea. Finally, it is in Singapore's interest to sustain a cohesive ASEAN; one that continues to be an effective multilateral platform representing a population of 625 million through which it can better engage international actors in conflict management, in particular China and the US.

From August 2015 to August 2018, Singapore will function as the coordinator for ASEAN-China relations. Within this role, Singapore's Ambassador Tommy Koh has identified the challenges faced by Singapore as the 'South China Sea disputes, disunity in the ASEAN family, intense competition for influence between the major powers, and the deficit of trust between China and some ASEAN member states'.⁶⁹ In August 2016, China's Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Liu Zhenmin, declared that Singapore 'should butt out' and added that Singapore should do better in facilitating dialogue between China and ASEAN.⁷⁰ As the appointed intermediary, there is also the challenge and resultant complications of distinguishing between Singapore's position and when the island nation is conveying ASEAN's official position.⁷¹

As Du Jifeng reasons, 'Singapore thinks it's speaking for ASEAN rather than itself, but Beijing sometimes thinks it's Singapore's stance, and that makes the bilateral relations complicated'.⁷² For example, after the tribunal rejected China's claims in July 2016, Singapore requested 'all parties to fully respect legal and diplomatic processes', a statement widely interpreted as supporting the verdict reached by the Permanent Court of Arbitration—and a more forceful position than the statement issued at the end of the ASEAN summit in September 2016, which made no reference to China, the tribunal's decision or the dispute itself.⁷³

Part 3: The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Singapore and Australia, launched by the respective prime ministers in June 2015, sets out a long-term vision and roadmap aimed at enhancing relations across a range of areas of interest. Broadly, the agreement enhances economic integration; expands defence cooperation; promotes innovation and entrepreneurship; and strengthens 'people-to-people ties by facilitating tourism, cultural exchanges, and educational opportunities'.⁷⁴

The partnership brings together the national interests of Australia and Singapore for mutual benefit through a strategic *quid pro quo*. Both countries leverage a natural, historical and complementary partnership to offer each other strategic depth and, by extension, security, albeit in different areas. Underlining the belief that growth and prosperity for both countries and the region will inspire security, stability and peace, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop remarked in March 2014 that 'if the goal of traditional diplomacy is peace, then the goal of economic diplomacy is prosperity'.⁷⁵

As part of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, both countries have strengthened diplomatic relations through agreements to conduct annual leaders' meetings and cooperate with and within ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit. In doing so, both countries have indicated their continued support for regional multilateral institutions that promote a rules-based order where there is the preservation of autonomy, stability, continuous growth and an antipathy to the use of force to settle disputes. A mix of regional and extra-regional members participate in these forums, which are not aligned to any formal alliance and have a proven adaptability to talk about sensitive regional issues, such as China-US rivalry within Southeast Asia.

Despite being regularly dismissed as weak, these forums have proven to be robust enough to encourage the development of confidence-building processes and provide an avenue to admonish overly aggressive behaviour, while retaining the flexibility for members to seek parallel arrangements for their security. As Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen describes it, quoting Churchill, 'jaw-jaw is better than war-war'.⁷⁶ Forums such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit are also mechanisms that provide a non-provocative form of hedging within what G. John Ikenberry defines as a 'dual hierarchy' in the Asia-Pacific,

that is, a security hierarchy with the US at the apex, and an economic hierarchy dominated by China.⁷⁷

Andrew O'Neil argues that hedging appears to be the foreign policy that regional states have adopted where they recognise the need to balance between Beijing and Washington, wherein 'China provides the economic goodies in the form of trade and investment, while the US furnishes security protection that provides the insurance should things turn bad with Beijing'.⁷⁸ With the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, there is a shared recognition by Australia and Singapore that they should leverage their closer partnership to engage Beijing and Washington through these multilateral institutions and nurture confidence-building mechanisms between the two dominant powers.

Given its location at the southern end of the Asia-Pacific, Australia seeks to extend strategic depth by expanding its hinterland into ASEAN and Asia-Pacific economies through Singapore. Within the economic sphere, Australia and Singapore are again complementary partners. The strengths of each country's economy complement the other in a symbiotic relationship where a global hub with its networks (Singapore) matches the needs of a key exporter (Australia). Also, economic relations work well because both countries believe in the liberalisation of trade and open, rules-based trading systems.

With Singapore as Australia's fifth largest trading partner, the value of commerce between Singapore and Australia reached A\$27 billion in 2013, compared to A\$10 billion in 2003 when the Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement was initiated, with total investment from Singapore into Australia growing at an average of 15.4 per cent between 2010 and 2014.⁷⁹ As a reflection of the potential and intent of the partnership, Australia's aims for the economic relationship that it has with Singapore to eventually mirror that which it has with New Zealand.⁸⁰

Moving towards greater economic integration, both countries have agreed to upgrade the Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement, with their third iteration building on the draft Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. The Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement aims at delivering increased access to both markets, across various sectors, positioning Australia and Singapore as trade hubs for businesses and service providers to leverage expanding opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region.

According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Singapore has offered a higher level of preferential commitments to Australia, compared to any other trading partner.⁸¹ Reinforcing the Agreement, there will also be collaboration on science research, innovation and entrepreneurship. The respective national research institutions: Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research, and National Research Foundation, and Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) would be brought closer together, with S\$50 million to be jointly invested over five years to fund related projects. Australia will also establish one of its five international 'landing pads' in Singapore to nurture innovation and entrepreneurship and to encourage promising Australian technology start-ups to gain a foothold in Singapore and the broader Asia-Pacific market.

Beyond Singapore, there is even greater potential for Australia to tap into the ASEAN economies. It is telling that Australian companies invest almost 60 per cent more in New Zealand compared to ASEAN, despite the fact that New Zealand's economy is more than 90 per cent smaller.⁸² The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership will facilitate Australian access into the future ASEAN Economic Community, a huge market worth about US\$2.6 trillion with over 625 million people.⁸³ In 2014, the ASEAN Economic Community was the third largest economy in Asia and the seventh largest in the world.

The security dimension

On his visit to Canberra in October 2016, Prime Minister Lee outlined the intent of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, contending that:

We collaborated to build an inclusive and open regional security architecture, keep the international trading system open and enhance regional trade agreements, built strategic trust which underpins Singapore-Australia relations and enabled us to conclude an ambitious and forward-looking CSP [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership].⁸⁴

The emphasis on regional security and open trade based on strategic trust between Australia and Singapore arguably provides the main thrust of the partnership. During the same visit, Prime Minister Turnbull reiterated that the defence relationship was an exceptional one, stating that the 'decision to grant Singapore this special level of access underlies the enormous trust and respect that exists between our respective armed forces'.⁸⁵ In light of the growing China-US rivalry within the region, arguably the most significant aspect of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has been the agreement to reinforce the historically strong defence partnership.

Given its size, Singapore has no real geographical depth and does not have the luxury of pursuing a defence strategy which trades space for time. As it lacks suitable training areas for its armed forces, Singapore constantly seeks to mitigate its lack of strategic depth by seeking suitable overseas training areas for its Air Force and Army. In October 2016, Singapore's Defence Minister, Ng Eng Hen, described the importance of the training areas in Australia afforded by the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, where the SAF can conduct large-scale and joint training in a tropical operating environment, as a 'very rare piece of training ground'.⁸⁶

Over the next 25 years, Singapore will spend A\$2.25 billion to jointly develop military training areas and state-of-the-art facilities in Shoalwater Bay and Townsville in Queensland; a significant figure, which is about a sixth of its current defence budget. The commitment to a 25-year deal reflects the trust and strength of the relationship between both countries. This deal marks the first time that Singapore has been able to secure such a long-term overseas training agreement, albeit at considerable cost. In comparison, Singapore's other defence partners, such as the US and India, have committed to only 5-year agreements to host SAF training.⁸⁷

As part of the accord, the ADF and SAF will share access to the enhanced training areas, with an increase from the current six weeks to 18 weeks annually for the SAF (between February-May and August-November) and 34 weeks for the ADF.⁸⁸ The Shoalwater Bay training area is more than four times the size of Singapore, augmenting the necessary strategic hinterland that the city-state requires to continue to train its armed forces. The transformation of Shoalwater Bay training area is projected to have a positive economic spin-off effect on Queensland, injecting up to an estimated A\$35 million into the region's economy.⁸⁹

The total number of SAF personnel training in Australia is also significant, as it is arguable that only one other country has such special access to a comparable military footprint in Australia. In 2011, President Obama and then Prime Minister Julia Gillard agreed to a similar 25-year plan for up to 2500 US Marines and US Air Force aircraft to rotate through Darwin from 2017.⁹⁰ After six years of negotiations, Australia and the US finally agreed in October 2016 to a A\$2 billion cost-sharing mechanism to implement the Darwin-based initiative.

Comparing total numbers of foreign troops training in a country may not fully reflect the level and quality of a relationship. However, given the sensitivity and numbers involved, it is certainly a positive indicator of the flourishing partnership between Australia and Singapore vis-à-vis Canberra's relationship with its US ally. Given that the Australia-Singapore defence agreement took just over a year to complete in comparison, it is also arguable that the historical and growing strategic trust between both countries was critical in ensuring that such a landmark defence deal could be reached, even after taking into account the different cost-sharing models.

Also, Exercise TRIDENT, a joint humanitarian aid and disaster-relief exercise conducted annually in the Shoalwater Bay training area will be further developed and elevated to a signature bilateral military exercise. In addition, both countries will work together on defence science technology and conduct a pilot so-called Track 1.5 security dialogue. Intelligence and information sharing, particularly on counter-terrorism, will also be enhanced. As Australia and Singapore become more highly networked and susceptible to cyberspace threats, and as the spread of

radicalised Islam within Southeast Asia increases, cooperation among security agencies will develop further, complemented by already close relationships.

This explicit commitment to intelligence and information sharing differentiates the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership from other relationship agreements. Although Singapore has discrete intelligence arrangements with other countries, Graham notes that this is the first time that Singapore has openly committed to intelligence and information exchanges with another country, adding that 'intelligence sharing is obviously among the highest indicators of trust in a government-to-government relationship'.⁹¹

Overall, these defence and security initiatives will further strengthen an already robust Australian and Singaporean defence partnership. Given the broad scope of initiatives across the economy, defence and security, and cultural realms, this agreement is comprehensive in both form and function, easily surpassing partnerships that Australia has with other ASEAN countries.⁹² As stated by Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the partnership 'will transform our long-standing friendship into a dynamic, innovative and truly strategic partnership'.⁹³

Part 4: Policy recommendations

While the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership initiatives are broad and encompass a spectrum of agreements that meet the national interests of Australia and Singapore, some other future policy options could buttress the security partnership further. These policy choices are in niche defence areas that are not only mutually beneficial but would also offer opportunities to influence and build confidence between China and the US.

James Mugg and Christopher Cowan, for example, have asserted that future ADF operations will be conducted in four areas, namely humanitarian and disaster relief operations, the Middle East area of operations, maritime territorial disputes in East and Southeast Asia, and high-end conflict.⁹⁴ Except for East Asia and high-end conflict scenarios, this mirrors the SAF's current and possible future operational areas. Given the similarity in potential future operations, this paper will propose future policy options for the ADF and SAF in these three areas.

Humanitarian and disaster-relief operations

Initiative 1

Establish a regional humanitarian and disaster-relief cooperation program between the Singapore Armed Forces and the Australian Defence Force.

Natural disasters such as typhoons and tsunamis pose a trans-boundary threat to the security of the region. As observed during the global financial crisis from 2007 to 2009, as economies grow increasingly more interconnected and interdependent they become more vulnerable and less resilient to external shocks. Within this context, natural disasters have a similar impact beyond traditional borders that could potentially trigger a chain reaction on regional economies. Also, the magnitude of the humanitarian and economic impact of these disasters is often beyond the response capacity of regional countries.

Given mutual national interests in regional stability and prosperity, there is scope to establish a humanitarian and disaster-relief cooperation program between the ADF and SAF. This leading role would be particularly suited to the ADF and SAF, which are arguably the most advanced and capable military forces in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, with both equipped with advanced dual-use power-projection assets such as military transport aircraft and amphibious-capable ships.

In recent history, the ADF and SAF have separately provided responses to regional humanitarian and disaster-relief incidents such as Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, the earthquake in New Zealand in 2011, and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. In 2014, Singapore established a Regional HADR [humanitarian and disaster relief] Coordinating Centre to function as the primary point-of-contact to integrate the regional efforts of military disaster-relief units and agencies, such as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the Jakarta-based ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management.⁹⁵

The Regional HADR Coordinating Centre also leverages on its proximity to the RSN's Information Fusion Centre, located within the same Changi naval base to tap regional maritime information shared among 65 agencies in 35 countries. The Information Fusion Centre fuses information shared by partner navies and maritime agencies to provide an enhanced regional maritime situational awareness picture.⁹⁶ In addition to France, New Zealand, India and Thailand, the RAN also has a liaison officer posted to the Centre.⁹⁷

It is proposed that the proposed humanitarian and disaster-relief cooperation program would involve the following:

- Initiate an exchange of officers between the corresponding ADF and SAF humanitarian and disaster-relief centres by 2018. The ADF liaison officer, preferably from the RAN would be embedded within the Regional HADR Coordinating Centre and the Information Fusion Centre at the Changi naval base. The SAF liaison officer would be embedded within Australia's Headquarters Joint Operations Command in Bungendore.

During operations, the primary function of each officer would be to act as the liaison to coordinate and monitor humanitarian and disaster-relief efforts between the SAF and ADF. During non-operational periods, both officers would be responsible for developing the tactics, techniques and procedures for the ADF and SAF to interoperate during humanitarian and disaster-relief operations. It is estimated that the total cost for deploying each officer would be about A\$0.5 million per year.

- Establish an integrated ADF-SAF Forward Deployed Needs Assessment and Survey Team as part of the agreement to exchange liaison officers by 2018. This team would consist of two personnel (one officer and one non-commissioned officer) each from the current establishment in Headquarters Joint Operations Command and the Regional HADR Coordination Centre. The team would be on short notice-to-move and would be responsible for providing preliminary disaster-relief assessment before follow-on units are deployed.
- Establish a joint humanitarian and disaster-relief phase within Exercise TRIDENT, desirably to include personnel from the People's Liberation Army and the US military. Humanitarian and disaster-relief exercises provide a valuable entry-level confidence-building opportunity for armed forces not familiar with operating together. Besides confidence building, this would develop better interoperability for militaries operating within the same disaster-relief arena. Such a modified Exercise TRIDENT would build on the two Sino-US humanitarian and disaster-relief exercises initiated since 2013.⁹⁸ Given that Exercise TRIDENT is an existing exercise, Sino-US participation should be able to be launched by 2018.

Middle East area of operations

Initiative 2

The Australian Defence Force and the Singapore Armed Forces to work together to establish and sustain interoperability for Middle East operations against Daesh.

Since 2001, the ADF has been operating in the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Gulf of Aden. There are currently more than 1000 ADF personnel in the Middle East as part of the international coalition against Daesh (Operation OKRA), to providing training and assistance to the Afghanistan National Army (Operation HIGHROAD) and as part of Combined Maritime Forces (Operation MANITOU).⁹⁹

Similarly, in concert with the ADF, the SAF has deployed a force protection element from 2009 to 2013, a UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] Task Group and artillery trainers in 2010, liaison officers to the US Central Command Headquarters since December 2014, intelligence fusion officers since January 2015, an Imagery Analysis Team to the Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters in Kuwait since September 2015, and a KC-135R tanker since May 2015.

From 2017, a SAF medical support team will be deployed to Iraq to provide medical services to coalition forces and the local Iraqi population.¹⁰⁰ Since the RSN's participation in Combined Task Force 151 in 2009 until today, Singapore has contributed more than 1400 personnel to coalition counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.¹⁰¹ Ong Weichong notes that these deployments reflect niche areas where the SAF can contribute technology as a force multiplier rather than 'boots on the ground'.¹⁰²

These operations allow the SAF to amass operational experience, battle test its capabilities, and benchmark itself against other armed forces in real-time but low-risk environments.¹⁰³ It also provides a statement of intent by Singapore to support its partners, particularly against common transnational threats such as terrorism and piracy that have an impact on Singapore's security and stability.

Although cooperation between the respective air forces and navies of Singapore and Australia are ongoing, integrated operations between the two armies were curtailed after Singapore exited Afghanistan in June 2013. Joseph Soeters *et al* described the early challenges faced by the force protection element in 2009 as 'no one at Camp Holland had working experience with the SAF' and, as such, 'there was a cultural divide between the Dutch, Australians and Singaporeans'.¹⁰⁴ They explained that although the SAF offered a unique capability, there were 'different security domains, disconnected technical networks, cultural distance and a lack of confidence' that hampered integration.

Since 2013, there have not been any significant integrated operations involving both armies. Given the commitment of resources by both countries to develop training areas in Queensland over the next 25 years, particularly for army training, it is critical that both armed forces continue to maintain and refresh their areas of cooperation. Accordingly, the proposed areas for collaboration in the Middle East area of operations are as follows:

- Establish an agreement to conduct a biannual bilateral intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance strike exercise in Australia. Similar in scope to Exercise FORGING SABRE, carried out in the US by the SAF, an Australia-Singapore exercise would provide the opportunity for both armed forces to train together in conducting integrated strike missions under conditions mimicking previous coalition operations in Afghanistan.

The exercise would involve air force, army and intelligence assets such as the SAF's High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, which the ADF is considering acquiring, and capabilities such as the Artillery Hunting Radars, which was utilised as part of the force protection of ADF elements in Afghanistan. The exercise would build on current single Service exercises, namely Exercise WALLABY for land forces (currently ADF and SAF), Exercise PITCH BLACK for air forces (ADF, SAF and other nations) and Exercise TRIDENT for joint forces (SAF and ADF).

- Initiate a defence technology cooperation program to develop solutions to countering improvised explosive devices (IED). IEDs represent a persistent, pervasive lethal threat across all areas of operations, particularly in coalition combat zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. From 2011 to 2013, over 15,000 people were killed and nearly 45,000 people

wounded by IEDs outside Afghanistan, as these devices have been adopted as the weapon of choice for insurgents and terrorists.¹⁰⁵

This defence technology cooperation program should be brought under the existing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement and funded through the proposed S\$50 million funding to Singapore's National Research Foundation and Agency for Science, Technology and Research, and Australia's CSIRO.¹⁰⁶ This initiative should also be broadened to include an exchange between the ADF and SAF on the tactics, techniques and procedures in countering IEDs, ideally between the Singapore Combat Engineers and the Royal Australian Engineers.

Maritime territorial disputes in Southeast Asia

Initiative 3

Contribute to reducing tensions in maritime Southeast Asia by introducing confidence-building measures.

Given the current tensions in the South China Sea, there is scope for the ADF and SAF to work together to stymie insecurity, build confidence and mitigate the potential escalation of territorial disagreements within the region. Within the context of regional countries that are rapidly acquiring undersea capabilities and introducing them in a relatively new area of operations, the potential exists for misunderstanding and miscalculation in the employment of submarines and corresponding anti-submarine warfare assets, especially in the contested South China Sea and Straits of Malacca.¹⁰⁷

However, as this is a relatively fledgling capability development area for the region, there also exists significant opportunities to outline and initiate confidence-building behaviour to reduce suspicions that could undermine regional security and stability. This role, to lead in the development of confidence-building measures in maritime Southeast Asia, is particularly suited to the RAN and RSN, given that they are the two most advanced navies within the region.

Despite the emphasis by the ADF on international defence diplomacy, there are only two exercises (Exercise KOWARI and Exercise PANDAROO) between the ADF and the People's Liberation Army, involving less than 100 personnel. Noting that the ADF, US Armed Forces and SAF regularly train together on a much larger scale, there is scope to include Chinese participation in these multilateral exercises. Canberra could explore leveraging the SAF's relatively closer relationship as a means to deepen the ADF's engagement with the People's Liberation Army.

For example, Singapore has established a bilateral agreement on defence exchanges, security collaboration and regular China-Singapore Defence Policy Dialogues with the People's Liberation Army since 2008, culminating in a Four-Point Consensus agreed in November 2014. A deeper and broader engagement by the ADF and SAF with the People's Liberation Army and US Armed Forces could build confidence, clarify intentions and contribute to regional peace and stability.

The proposed confidence-building measures are as follows:

- Establish an undersea code for unplanned encounters at sea, based on the protocol ratified in 2014 by 25 Asia-Pacific countries.¹⁰⁸ Currently, no code of conduct exists for undersea operations. On the other hand, such codes have been established for naval ships and military aircraft to communicate using standard phrases during unplanned encounters, with the aim of reducing misunderstandings and misjudgments that could trigger an escalation of tensions at sea. Although submarine operations are sensitive, opportunities exist to collaborate by sharing unclassified information to facilitate undersea navigation.

David Boey cites non-sensitive information such as seismic activity, fishing and movement of large vessels with deep draughts that can affect undersea navigation which could be shared.¹⁰⁹ The information could be provided through the RSN-developed Submarine Safety Information Portal hosted through the Information Fusion Centre at the Changi naval base.

The relevant regional underwater code of conduct information could be managed through the existing RAN liaison officer at the Centre. Depending on the information to be shared, a similar RSN liaison position could be established at Headquarters Joint Operations Command in Bungendore or at the RAN's Fleet Headquarters at Garden Island. The proposed connectivity between the RAN and RSN would generate a more comprehensive near real-time picture of events affecting underwater navigation within Southeast Asia and around Australia.

- Establish a memorandum of agreement by 2018 between the RAN and RSN to provide an integrated regional submarine rescue response framework within Southeast Asia. The RAN and RSN are the only two regional navies equipped with a full suite of indigenous submarine rescue capabilities.¹¹⁰ Thus far, the RSN has signed submarine rescue memorandums of understanding with the US, Vietnam and Australian navies.

Coordinated through the Regional HADR Coordination Centre and Information Fusion Centre, a RAN and RSN integrated submarine rescue approach would offer regional navies, including the People's Liberation Army-Navy and US Navy, access to a pooled submarine rescue capability. The utility of these capabilities could also be expanded to other search-and-rescue missions, such as those undertaken for recent airline crashes.

- Invite observers from the People's Liberation Army and US Armed Forces to witness FPDA exercises in the South China Sea, such as the recently concluded Exercise BERSAMA LIMA 16. Observers would be able to view the interoperability between the armed forces of Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK. This initiative could potentially foster closer cooperation and trust between FPDA member countries, China and the US.

Although the FPDA is now 45 years old, Sam Bateman argues that it still provide a useful security link for Australia, New Zealand and the UK into Southeast Asia.¹¹¹ Moving forward, with the participation of observers from China and US, the FPDA framework would be rejuvenated, retaining its relevance to regional security.

Part 5: Future challenges

As the relationship between Australia and Singapore develops beyond the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, potential future challenges may arise. Although both countries appear to share long-term strategic interests, one factor not experienced by Singapore would be the relatively frequent changes of government in Canberra (with Australia having had five Prime Ministers, eight Ministers for Defence and five Ministers for Foreign Affairs in the last eight years). Responsibilities within the Defence portfolio have also recently been split (or expanded) between the Minister for Defence (currently Senator Marise Payne) and Minister for Defence Industry (currently Christopher Pyne).

Some would argue that the risk of policy u-turns increases with every change of ministers and adjustments within portfolios, aggravated in the short term by the slender majority of the current government. Nonetheless, it has been to Canberra's credit that Prime Minister Turnbull has maintained his predecessor's commitment to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, going one step further and proposing that the relationship be elevated to a level similar to that which Australia enjoys with New Zealand.

Moreover, given bipartisan backing, support for the partnership is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. As outlined by Opposition Leader Bill Shorten's welcome speech to Prime Minister Lee in October 2016, the partnership represents 'good news for the region and our

region'.¹¹² As Graham notes, it suggests that 'a shared pragmatism between Singapore and Australia is more likely to prevail'.¹¹³

Nevertheless, the two countries have not always experienced a 'shared pragmatism'. In 2011, for example, the Australian Foreign Investment Review Board did not approve a proposed merger of the Singapore and Australian Stock Exchanges because they assessed that it was not in the national interest to do so.¹¹⁴ This rejection was a surprise, as the proposal to merge had been endorsed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission in 2010.¹¹⁵ According to a former Australian Stock Exchange Chairman, there were claims that the government had intervened and vetoed the deal behind the scenes based on what appeared to be a lot of 'emotional and xenophobic type issues'.¹¹⁶ This rejection marked the first time since 2001 that a major foreign takeover was not successful on the grounds of national interest.

Similar concerns have been raised recently about the acquisition of the Port of Darwin and the proposed purchases of the Kidman cattle property by China-based companies.¹¹⁷ The opportunity cost of rejection on the grounds of national interest can be considerable, noting that there was an almost 20 per cent difference between the sale of Ausgrid in October 2016 at A\$20.8 billion versus an offer in August 2016 from State Grid Corporation of China that reportedly was worth A\$25.1 billion.¹¹⁸ The Australian Government rejected this earlier Chinese bid on the basis of national security concerns.¹¹⁹

However, despite these issues, overall Chinese investment in Australia and Singapore is still rising. Arguably, in the long term, if economic prosperity in the region stems from a symbiotic increase in trade and investment across Australia, China, Singapore and the US, then political ideologies and security tensions may matter less.

Besides economics, there are also fundamental differences in values that exist between both countries, such as human rights, particularly with regards to the imposition of capital punishment. Although capital punishment was abolished in Australia in 1973, it remains a fundamental part of Singapore's penal code. In 2005, despite appeals by Canberra, an Australian drug trafficker was hanged in Singapore.¹²⁰

In the aftermath, Canberra acknowledged that people-to-people relationships would be affected but caveated this with an assurance that there would be no curtailment of economic or military relations. When former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew visited Australia in 2007, hostile protests erupted over Singapore's alleged human rights record and restriction of civil liberties.¹²¹ Overall, these events provide a reminder that although the current partnership is blossoming, there continues to be underlying differences between the two countries.

Given Singapore's ethnic Chinese majority population, with cultural and economic links to China and the continuing influx of mainland Chinese immigrants over the last decade, Michael Barr has highlighted that there may be concerns that Singapore might 'switch sides' to Beijing without much regard for Australia's wishes or prior commitments.¹²² While Barr's pessimistic sentiments may reflect a minority view, Singapore does have a considerable footprint in China and vice-versa. Singapore was China's largest foreign investor, with investments totalling US\$5.8 billion in 2014; at the same time, Singapore has been China's largest investment destination in Asia.¹²³

However, such concerns are unlikely to be realised because of certain external and internal factors affecting Singapore. Internally, there has been increasing negativity from Singaporeans against the rising number of immigrants, particularly from mainland China, who compete for jobs within the tight labour market and appear to be 'too prejudiced or bigoted to adapt to Singapore's multi-racial society'.¹²⁴ Next, Singapore hedges its international relations by adopting an omnidirectional engagement policy, leveraging its linguistic and cultural links to yield economic advantages with China but at the same time promoting the US as the principal guarantor of regional peace and security. As former Singaporean Senior Minister S. Jayakumar has asserted, in describing Singapore's foreign policy towards China and the US:

We have to demonstrate, as best as we can, that just like them, we are driven by calculations of our national interest. We don't want to go out of our way to upset or annoy any country, but if

our interests coincide, we will support them on an issue. If our interests do not coincide, we will disagree.¹²⁵

Another potential future challenge for both countries is a possible scenario where American power within the Southeast Asian region gradually recedes vis-à-vis the rise of China. Despite the pivot or rebalance to Asia, the US mainland is still geographically more distant to the region as compared to China. As China's power projection capabilities grow, and as it establishes a larger and more capable military presence in the South China Sea, the US either accepts a new reality or seeks to challenge it. Using a historical analogy, this state of affairs has been cast as a 'Thucydides trap', where a preeminent power's (the US) fear of a change in the status quo compels it to adopt a pre-emptive strategy against a rising power (China), thereby precipitating conflict.¹²⁶

Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has proposed that China and US should adopt a new framework of 'constructive realism for a common purpose' and commit to a shared understanding and working together for mutual benefit, or conflict will ensue.¹²⁷ He suggests that this strategy could include an agreement on cybersecurity, a bilateral strategy towards North Korea, and a joint effort towards reinvigorating the G20.¹²⁸

Echoing similar sentiments, Singapore's former Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam has also cautioned against any anti-China rhetoric, asserting that the region is 'big enough to accommodate a rising China and a reinvigorated US'.¹²⁹ Indeed, perhaps as a reflection of Singapore's hedging and balancing strategy towards China and the US, ships from the People's Liberation Army-Navy also visit Changi naval base and exercise with the RSN, albeit on a much smaller scale than with the US Navy.

Conclusion

Australia and Singapore are natural and complementary partners, with similarities in strategic perspectives not matched within the region. The future of the relationship is likely to be sustained by a *quid pro quo* between an island nation-state seeking security by extending its strategic depth and a country at the edge of the Asia-Pacific pursuing economic interests to enhance its prosperity, particularly in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia will continue to be a region that is of strategic interest to Australia, China, Singapore and the US. However, it is and will continue to be a region fraught with current and historical issues of territorial disputes, suspicions and the legacies of colonialism and war. Within that context, both Australia and Singapore continue to support US involvement in the region as the guarantor of peace, stability and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

Over the next 25 years, rivalry between the two global powers will present a conundrum for Australia and Singapore. As China rises and the US pivots to the Asia-Pacific, both countries will need to continue to manage a delicate balancing act in supporting the US as the principal guarantor of regional security but relying on China as their biggest trading partner. Both Australia and Singapore will need to navigate the turbulence caused by tensions generated by the China-US rivalry within the region. As long as there is no need to choose sides, China-US rivalry within Southeast Asia provides Australia and Singapore with opportunities such as the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership to develop a broader and deeper relationship for mutual benefit.

As long as the strategic calculus of Australia and Singapore remains consistent over the next 25 years, and the potential challenges are addressed or mitigated, the *quid pro quo* partnership between both countries should continue to be resilient and mutually beneficial. The paper has contended that future bilateral policy options in humanitarian disaster-relief, the Middle East and the South China Sea have the potential not only to buttress the partnership but also nurture confidence-building behaviour with China and the US that could build and sustain regional security and stability. The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement will enhance the future bilateral relationship as long as Australian and Singaporean national interests are aligned, and both countries are not forced to make a choice between China and the US. As long as Australia and Singapore move forward together within the boundaries of the partnership, and no further obligations are expected or demanded, the partnership should continue to flourish.

Notes

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