

# New Zealand-Singapore defense relations in a volatile world

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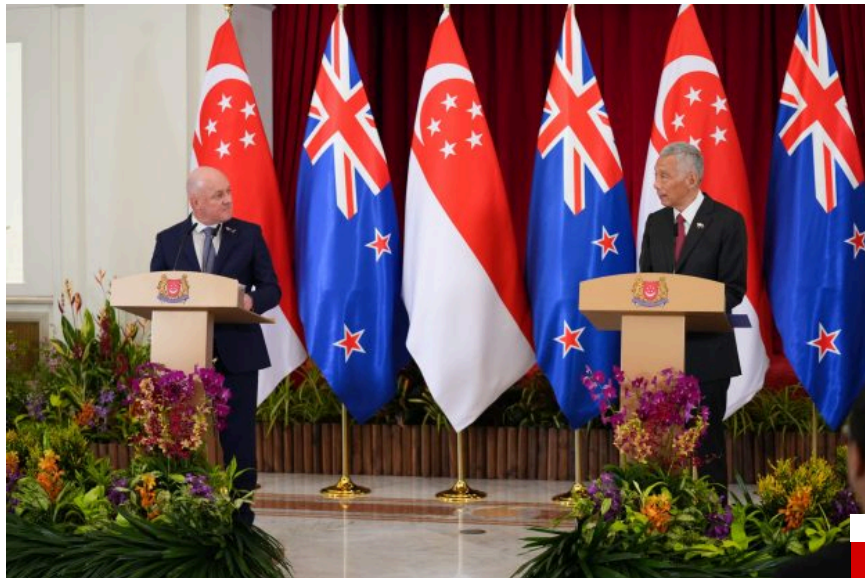
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## New Zealand-Singapore Defense Relations in a Volatile World

Defense relations between New Zealand and Singapore clearly benefit their national security interests. What’s the next step?

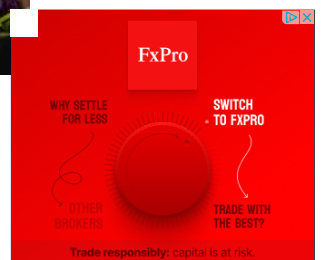
By **Muhammad Faizal Abdul Rahman**

January 17, 2025



New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon meets with then-Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on Apr. 15, 2024.

Credit: [Facebook/ Christopher Luxon](#)



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building and mark 60 years of diplomatic relations with New Zealand. The history between both small states underscores the significance of defense relations for survival in a volatile world.

New Zealand was not only one of the first countries to recognize Singapore's independence in 1965, but it also contributed to the defense-building of Singapore during the city-state's formative years. New Zealand troops maintained a presence at Dieppe Barracks in Singapore until [1989](#), after British and Australian troops left in the 1970s. Given New Zealand's assistance during the Cold War, the first prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, said in [Wellington in 1975](#) that New Zealand troops maintained “a psychological sense of stability and security” in Singapore. New Zealand continues to be a member of the [Five Power Defense Arrangements](#), which began in 1971 as a consultative mechanism to support the defense of Malaysia and Singapore against an external armed attack.

Fast-forward to the present day. New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon visited Singapore in April 2024 and met its then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. In a [news release](#), Luxon said that “Singapore is New Zealand's closest security and economic partner in Southeast Asia. We are aligned as small, advanced economies and we are natural partners in addressing common challenges.” During the visit, both countries expanded their [Enhanced Partnership](#) to include a sixth pillar on “Supply Chain and Connectivity,” given mutual concerns over the disruption of essential supplies due to

crises and the impact on national security. They also agreed to [further elevate](#) their countries' Enhanced Partnership in 2025.

Practical cooperation undergirds the defense and security pillar of the Enhanced Partnership. For example, Singapore will resume the live-firing artillery exercise "Thunder Warrior" in 2025. The exercise, hosted in New Zealand, was paused during the COVID-19 pandemic. The New Zealand Defense Force will continue contributing an [analyst](#) to the Counter Terrorism Information Facility, hosted in [Singapore](#) to support multilateral security efforts in Southeast Asia. There is also a New Zealand military liaison officer at the Information Fusion Center, hosted in Singapore, which serves as a regional maritime security center.

Defense relations between New Zealand and Singapore clearly benefit their national security interests. As both countries cultivate their relations, their cooperation could extend to exchanges in cross-cutting security issues

Cyber and disinformation threats will grow as both countries pursue growth opportunities in the digital economy. At the same time, criminality and geopolitical contestation pervade cyberspace. The New Zealand National Cyber Policy Office and the Singapore Cyber Security Agency have signed a cybersecurity cooperation arrangement in the civilian sector.

Cyber-physical threats to undersea cables and pipelines are also a major concern, particularly for island nations, in the era of digitalization and hybrid warfare and due to the growth of the [dark](#)

fleet. The resilience of undersea infrastructure is vital to the communications and power systems that sustain the economies and societies of New Zealand and Singapore.

The two countries could also work together to defend against threats to supply chains – for example, if armed conflict were to break out in the South China Sea and disrupt global trade. The air freight partnership between New Zealand and Singapore to transport food and medical supplies worked well during the COVID-19 pandemic. This model could be adapted and supported by military assets during periods of regional tensions.



Finally, in the current strategic environment, geopolitical developments that affect the national security of countries in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific are intertwined. New Zealand and Singapore could share information to feel the pulse of the security situation in their respective neighborhoods, increasing cooperation on inter-regional security issues.

Additionally, there is convergence between their national security and regional security interests.

New Zealand and Singapore face [shared security challenges](#) and both have an interest in ensuring the relevance of ASEAN-led mechanisms in promoting peace and stability. Both countries reiterated their commitment to security multilateralism – the Five Power Defense Arrangements and ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) – when their senior officials met in [November 2024](#) for the 14th Singapore-New Zealand Strategic Dialogue.

Since the current New Zealand government assumed office in November 2023, it has [stepped up engagements](#) with ASEAN countries, including Singapore, as part of its foreign policy reset. In a foreign policy speech to the [Lowy Institute](#), Luxon said that New Zealand is committed to “building holistic and strategic partnerships with them, by being more present, and by being more responsive to their needs.” There are plans to [upgrade](#) New Zealand-ASEAN relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. This development could signal a newfound realization that the stability of Southeast Asia is crucial to New Zealand’s global trade and a [safeguard](#) against armed conflict from reaching the country.

As New Zealand and Singapore have assumed [co-chairmanship](#) of the ADMM-Plus Experts’ Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) from 2024 to 2027, there is potential to enhance ASEAN-led mechanisms. For example, the [Conference](#) in Disaster Relief in the Context of Climate Change, planned for 2025 is an opportunity for both countries to facilitate the build-up of regional countries’ knowledge and response capacity, thereby sustaining ASEAN’s

relevance. And similar to how Singapore served alongside the New Zealand battalion in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in [East Timor](#) in 2001, both countries could collaborate in helping Timor-Leste build the institutional capacity to contribute to ADMM-Plus processes as it works to achieve full membership in ASEAN.

There would be challenges as ASEAN struggles to maintain its centrality and relevance in the regional security architecture and as the New Zealand Defense Force faces [workforce](#) cuts and [budgetary](#) constraints. Nonetheless, both countries should muster the political will to navigate these challenges.

New Zealand and Singapore are small states in a volatile world afflicted by geopolitical tensions, toxic nationalism, and double standards in the adherence to international law. Their survival depends on them playing a crucial role in sustaining multilateralism even as they cooperate bilaterally in defense and national security. The collective weight of bilateral cooperation and multilateralism is still the best option for defending their interests in the face of a difficult strategic environment where the strong do what they can and amid global challenges such as climate-induced disasters.

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