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Securing Peace and Security for Singapore: Turning Constraints into Opportunities

By Ong Weichong

Synopsis

Singapore's intrinsic sensitivity to shifts in the global system is a vulnerability, but this vulnerability can be mitigated and turned into opportunity.

Commentary

ON THE 30th anniversary of Total Defence Day, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence, it may be opportune to take stock of Singapore's collective achievements and contemplate what it takes to protect and enhance the Singapore way of life in the next 50 years. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong provided an assessment of the state of the international environment in the next five decades at the 2014 NTU Ministerial Forum. PM Lee said:

"Nobody can predict the future, but some trends are clear. First of all, Asia will play a much wider role in international affairs. China and India should continue to develop and carry along the rest of the region, including Singapore...There will be repercussions on relations between big powers, particularly between America and China. So we are talking about a very major change in the way the world will be ordered over the next half-century."

Defence diplomacy: The silent sentinel

Referring to current frictions in the western Pacific, he added:

"These are relatively small examples of the problems which will arise and over the next 50 years, the tectonic shifts which we will see will be much bigger than anything we have experienced so far. So we have to hope that all the countries will manage them peacefully, wisely and with restraint."

The importance of a peaceful global power transition to the security and prosperity of Singapore cannot be over-emphasised. In light of Singapore's position as a global maritime and financial hub and its inextricable ties to the global trade system, even minute shifts in global trends will have an impact on Singapore and the way of life for its citizens. Furthermore, any such impact will be magnified by constraints posed by its small size and lack of strategic depth. However, this does not mean that such constraints cannot be turned into opportunities.

Peace dividend

Since independence, two generations of Singaporeans (both generations X and Y) have grown up knowing only peace in Singapore. Living in an era of peace, it is understandable that younger Singaporeans in their twenties and thirties question longstanding perceptions of Singapore's vulnerability as rhetoric rather than a reflection of accurate geopolitical realities. In this respect, regional interstate conflict, much less war, is seen as a distant and remote possibility.

The peace dividend enjoyed by Singaporeans is a public good peculiar to the function of post-WWII militaries where the *raison d'être* is the prevention rather than the pursuit of war. Indeed, the SAF's mission statement reads: "The mission of MINDEF and the Singapore Armed Forces is to enhance Singapore's peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor."

In many respects, the umbrella of peace and security protecting Singaporeans for close to 50 years is the result of efforts at defence diplomacy that are enjoyed, but little seen or understood. Moreover, when successes at defence diplomacy do get picked up by the media, the need for security means that the efforts behind the scenes of defence diplomats often get left out of the picture.

One such recent success at regional defence diplomacy in which Singapore has played a crucial role is in submarine rescue. In this case, Singapore has been at the forefront in promoting cooperation in submarine rescue among regional navies. To that end, bilateral agreements have been signed with Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam. Another initiative that has enhanced regional security is the setting up of the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) at Changi Naval Base. For the past three years, IFC has served as a regional maritime information hub where like-minded countries have come together to share information and enhance maritime situation awareness.

The manifestation of a credible defence capability is well-represented by the ships, aircraft and other hardware of the SAF, but defence diplomacy plays an equally crucial, albeit less visible role of a 'hand-maiden' in securing the peace and security of Singapore.

Turning vulnerability into opportunity

This success at defence diplomacy is not accidental. The keen sense of vulnerability that is said to be a quintessential Singaporean trait has compelled defence planners to constantly seek new approaches and opportunities to do things better – often with the larger global and regional perspective in mind. In short, an acute awareness of the constraints faced by Singapore in size, resources and geography can be a driver for innovation in defence planning.

Peace and security is not a certainty, particularly when Singapore's vulnerabilities are inherently intertwined with its acute sensitivities to shocks in the global system and the current global power transition that is taking form.

However, this does not mean that a small state like Singapore is helpless against the tide of global change. In the realm of defence diplomacy and collective action, there are opportunities for the development of strategies and responses that will secure the peace and security of Singapore in the next 50 years.

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