

# Singapore' s Defence Policy: Deterrence, Diplomacy and the Soldier-Diplomat

Ho, Shu Huang

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## **Singapore's Defence Policy: Deterrence, Diplomacy and the Soldier-Diplomat**

Ho Shu Huang

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*A recent Malaysian newspaper article has incorrectly described Singapore's defence policy by tying it exclusively to American assistance and interests. Singapore's defence policy of deterrence and diplomacy is actually autonomous. Both aspects are also inter-twined.*

IN A 15 SEPTEMBER op-ed piece in Malaysia's *The Star* newspaper, Suzalie Mohamad, a fellow at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), suggests Singapore's apparent military build-up is part of a larger American plan to contain China presumably by establishing an American outpost in the Republic. Southeast Asian countries, he urges, should protest this provocative development.

The writer's suggestion rests on the apparent depth of US-Singapore military cooperation. He argues the city-state receives military assistance in exchange for being an American regional ally. Framing this within Singapore's defence policy of deterrence and diplomacy, the writer further argues this intimate relationship has helped Singapore "build an offensive-minded security force" (deterrence), yet also "seek the support and protection of the US" (diplomacy) when it is threatened. This, he states, is Singapore's "two-fold" defence strategy.

### **Singapore's Actual Defence Policy**

The writer's interpretation of Singapore's defence policy is misguided. The modern Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) is largely a product of indigenous R&D. There have only been limited technology transfers from the US. Singapore is self-reliant in its ability to deter aggressors.

More significant, however, is the writer's misinterpretation of diplomacy in Singapore's defence policy. Firstly, developing defence relations is just one part of Singapore's diplomatic efforts which span other areas. Secondly, Singapore's defence diplomacy is not geared towards courting American protection. Rather, it seeks to establish defence ties with other countries. In this decade alone, Singapore has signed Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with India, Germany, Indonesia, New Zealand and most recently, Vietnam.

Unfortunately, the conflation of Singapore's defence diplomatic agreements, such as the DCA, with mutual defence treaties has resulted in the illusion that Singapore has many allies which provide it a wide security umbrella. This is the interpretation the writer adopts in his understanding of US-Singapore defence relations.

This is incorrect for Singapore neither has, nor seeks, such alliances. Instead, as a diplomatic element of Singapore's defence policy, DCAs boost Singapore's defences by offering long-term avenues of communication between signatories, partly through the development of personal and professional relationships among their defence communities.

Though it may seem that it is the monolithic and impersonal state that goes to war with another, the paths chosen are ultimately still decided by people within government, where personal or professional relationships between opposing sides can make a difference. It has been said the ASEAN way works because it also emphasises networks that are informal and personal, in addition to those which are formal and institutional. This is why a DCA between Singapore and Indonesia, supposedly one of Singapore's primary threats, exists.

### **Beyond Deterrence: The Defence Establishment as Diplomat**

While the defence community is instinctively pigeon-holed with deterrence, DCAs afford it a unique role in diplomacy through jointly-organised activities and personnel exchanges. Jointly-organised military exercises, conferences, workshops and visits allow officials at different levels to interact with each other at a professional and social level. Anecdotal experience suggests there is something to be said about diplomacy done over golf games or karaoke sessions. Personnel exchanges between military units, defence ministries, and military and civilian schools allow more substantial, and therefore deeper, contact between personnel from different countries.

In some cases, it can even allow interaction between personnel of countries who would not otherwise meet, with Singapore playing host. For example, this year's 41-week Command and Staff Course (CSC) in Singapore is attended by officers from Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, China, Thailand, Brunei, India, Vietnam, New Zealand, Australia and the US. Similarly, the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) count foreign and local military officials as students annually.

There is historical evidence that such interaction does pay dividends. The commander of the SAF's contingent to Meulaboh in Aceh following the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004, then Colonel Tan Chuan Jin, was a former army attaché in Jakarta. Several of the senior officers under him had attended professional military courses in Indonesia, and had made friends with their Indonesian peers, some of whom were local military commanders in the affected region. These friendships, underscored by trust and familiarity, allowed the Indonesian military to work better with the SAF than with other national contingents.

More than half a century earlier, Naval Marshal General Isoroku Yamamoto, infamous for his surprise attack on the Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbour, actually had deep reservations on waging war with the US because of his personal experience living there first as a student at Harvard University, and subsequently as the Japanese naval attaché in Washington D.C. He knew that attacking the US would cost Japan dearly. In spite of his pacifist views that resulted in death threats, Yamamoto, still carried out his orders because of unquestioning loyalty to the emperor, staying true to the *Bushidō* code he subscribed to. Had Yamamoto lived in a different era, he would have probably steered a different course because of his American experience, and so might have history.

Two days after signing a DCA with Vietnam, Singapore Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean addressed an audience of Vietnamese defence officials and military officers at the National Defence College of

Vietnam. In describing the possible areas of cooperation within the region's security architecture, Mr Teo properly represented Singapore's approach to diplomacy in defence, what Suzalie has misunderstood by narrowly tying it to the US. The venue of the Singapore defence minister's address, a defence college, was also a poignant symbol of the nexus of deterrence and diplomacy, where officers not only learn how to wage war, but additionally develop impressions and relationships which may also help secure the peace.

*Ho Shu Huang is Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is with the Military Transformations Programme at the School's constituent unit, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.*