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Citation	Tan, S. S. (2016). America the Indispensable Power: Singapore's Perspective of America as a Security Partner. <i>Asian Politics & Policy</i> , 8(1), 119-135.
Date	2016
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/42804
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America the Indispensable Power: Singapore's Perspective of America as a Security Partner

See Seng Tan*

Security relations between Singapore and the United States have evolved significantly since the former gained independence in 1965. From an unlikely partnership pursued by Singapore by default rather than choice during Singapore's formative years, the United States has since evolved into a vital partner of Singapore because of the indispensable role it has played in ensuring a stable balance of power in the Asia-Pacific and in facilitating the economic prosperity of the region. Their partnership has endured rough patches due to political differences. In the post-9/11 period, Singapore's security has also been affected as a result of its close ties with the United States. Moreover, Singapore's reliance on hedging has at times fostered doubts – more so now in the era of U.S. rebalancing – about the congruence of its interests with those of America. However, it is clear Singapore prefers the perceived benign presence of the United States over other powers.

Key words: counterterrorism, defense cooperation, hedging, indispensable power, stable balance of power

Prudence dictates that there should be a balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. This is reflected in a widely held consensus that the U.S. presence in the region should be sustained. A military presence does not need to be used to be useful. Its presence makes a difference and makes for peace and stability in the region. This stability serves the interests of all, including those of China (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Allison & Blackwill, 2013).

The U.S. remains the dominant Pacific power. The Pacific Command and the U.S. 7th Fleet are a powerful force in being, and a key factor for peace and stability in the region. America's core interest in Asia has not changed and that is a stable region that is open to do business with all countries and a regional order that enables all major powers to engage constructively in Asia. America has played this benign role in Asia since the War. Its presence is welcomed by the many regional countries which have benefited from it, including Singapore (Lee Hsien Loong, 2015).

As a small state whose survival has long depended on the goodwill and support of neighbors considerably larger than it, Singapore has actively sought to promote and facilitate the maintenance of a balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region.

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From the Cold War years to the present, the “balancer” which Singapore has assiduously cultivated and viewed as vital to a stable power balance is the United States. Crucially, this perspective has not changed in the light of a rapidly evolving global and regional environment in which the United States, despite being the world’s only global power, visibly stumbled in its management both of the international economy (America was the culprit that triggered the global financial crisis of 2008) and international security (America left Iraq and Afghanistan no better, possibly worse off, than those countries were before it prosecuted its respective wars in those places). Nor has the rapid rise of China’s power and influence in the region, a development that has drawn many if not most Asian countries, Singapore included, tighter into the Chinese orbit, changed Singapore’s view. Not yet at least. If anything, Singapore has doggedly held on to its belief in America’s indispensability as the region’s quintessential balancer, not least against China’s growing might, reach, and assertiveness. Referring to America’s role in the region as “positive and unique,” Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted during a visit to Washington in May 2007 that Singaporeans “see America having a very positive and unique role in the region, ever since the Second World War. The landscape in Asia is changing, but America still plays a role which nobody else can play, holding the ring and fostering the stability of the region, enabling other countries to grow and prosper in a stable environment” (quoted in Tan, 2011, p. 157).

Unlike the Philippines and Thailand, Singapore has opted against a formal alliance with the United States. In 2003, Singapore reportedly declined an offer from the United States to be a major non-NATO ally (Huxley, 2012). Yet as the Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defence and Security (SFA) signed in July 2005 between Singapore and the United States enters its second decade, Singapore’s perspective of U.S. indispensability is unlikely to wane anytime soon. If anything, it has been reinforced by the launch in February 2012 of the United States–Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue (SPD), a formal annual dialogue which a former U.S. ambassador to Singapore has described as a “move up a weight class” in bilateral relations (Adelman, 2012, p. 11). Nor is the death in March 2015 of Singapore’s founding father Lee Kuan Yew, known for his firm belief in the need for a stable regional balance and the role of the United States to that end (Ang, 2013, p. 71), likely to change the way Singaporeans view their U.S. collaborator. Why the two nations have persisted as strong partners owes much to a deep congruence in both interests and tenets between them. It also owes much to a fidelity to foreign policy pragmatism (Chong, 2006). In the words of S. R. Nathan, the former president of Singapore:

Pragmatism is not the abjuration of idealism or the pursuit of idealistic goals but a necessary condition in international relations, particularly for us small states. We had to focus our limited resources and energies in areas which mattered. Our goals were clear – to ensure Singapore’s

independence, survival and growth. These were Singapore's core national interests, which we sought to advance. To recognize limitations is not to be passive. Between what actually exists and what must ultimately be accepted lies a margin of possibilities. We have always taken a pragmatic and focused attitude and have been able at times to transcend our smallness and limits, and made an impact far exceeding our size. Hence, we remained alert, analyzed situations clinically and remained flexible and nimble (Nathan, 2008).¹

No security partnership between two culturally and politically distinct countries would likely have been possible without pragmatism. In many ways, the United States and Singapore make an odd couple.² One the world's foremost economic and military power and a paragon of liberal democracy and the other a tiny city-state with an illiberal political tradition, the two nonetheless share a belief in market capitalism, in the need for stability and access within the global commons, and in the rule of law. Despite occasional hiccups that have threatened to mar political ties between them, the United States and Singapore have historically enjoyed robust relations. Nowhere is this more evident than in their defense and security relationship, which has grown steadily and surely since the late 1960s when Singapore actively supported Washington's war effort in Vietnam and looked to the United States as a strategic guarantor in the wake of Britain's military retreat from east of Suez (Ang, 2009). In the post-Cold War years, Singapore, not unlike its regional neighbors, has looked to the United States as a strategic guarantor and counterweight to China's rising power and influence, while proactively engaging China economically and diplomatically (Tan, 2012). The close collaboration between the two countries in counterterrorism in the 2000s has further deepened their partnership. Indeed, it is not incorrect to say of Singapore's partnership with the United States that, in key respects, it extends beyond the quality of the latter's alliances with some Asian states even at a time when most are upgrading their defense ties with Washington in the context of the U.S. rebalance toward Asia.

¹ As Bilahari Kausikan once described the pragmatism of Lee Kuan Yew, "[h]e understood that international order is the prerequisite for international law and organization. So while you may work towards an ideal and must stand firm on basic principles, you settle for what is practical at any point of time, rather than embark on quixotic quests." Quoted in Tay and Yeo (2015).

² As a top Singaporean diplomat once observed, "China and some other East Asian countries are widely regarded as fundamental challenges to the Western historical narrative because in East Asia and, above all, in China, the market economy flourishes without liberal democracy. This is regarded in the West as somehow unnatural. So in the thickets of inchoate Sino-American interdependence, the West is more off-balance, if not to say puzzled, by what has been happening." See Kausikan (2015).

An unlikely partnership: The Cold War years

The present vitality of Singapore-U.S. security ties stands in marked contrast to the coolness in Singapore's early attitude toward the United States. Indeed, the very notion of the two countries as partners, let alone robust partners, may strike some as especially odd in the light of Singapore's soft authoritarianism, which at various times has threatened to mar bilateral relations between the two nations. There was little in the early years after Singapore secured independence to suggest that the newly formed state viewed the United States as a patron. In foreign policy terms, Singapore focused instead on its former colonial master Britain and Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand (which, together with Singapore, are members of the Five Powers Defence Arrangements) with whom Singapore's history had been intertwined. Preferring that the British remain in Southeast Asia, Lee Kuan Yew - whom U.S. President Barack Obama eulogized as "a true giant of history who will be remembered for generations to come as the father of modern Singapore and as one the great strategists of Asian affairs" (quoted in Rawlinson & Han, 2015) - acknowledged that he would "be sorry to see [the British presence] be supplanted by American policy," an observation rendered in 1962 in the light of what Lee saw as dubious U.S. actions in Indochina particularly in Laos (quoted in Ang, 2013, pp. 26-7). Lee worried that the Americans would fail to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, a view no doubt reinforced by his personal experience with the Central Intelligence Agency's bungled operation in Singapore and its subsequent attempt to buy Lee's silence (*Nashua Telegraph*, 1965). A decade on and despite significant improvement in Singapore-U.S. ties, Lee emphatically insisted in 1971 that Singapore would resolutely refuse to host any American base (Ang, 2013, p. 28).

With the fall of Saigon in 1975, however, Lee presciently assumed that should the great powers successfully avoid war among themselves in the following two or three decades, China would eventually become the most dominant force in Asia and regard the Southeast Asian region as its rightful sphere of influence. Should that scenario come to pass, Lee's express preference was for a relationship with China akin to what the Caribbean and Latin American states have with the United States rather than what the Eastern European states had at that time with Comecon and the Warsaw Pact. More important for our purposes is Lee's belief in the need for the United States, even as it withdrew from Vietnam, to maintain a naval presence to balance against both the Soviet Union and China (Ang, 2013, p. 41).³ Closer to home, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 made the prospect of the domino theory - the notion that should any Southeast Asian state fall to communism, it would trigger a chain reaction whereby other regional states would go the same way - more conceivable to Singapore's leaders. To prevent that

³ Lee shared these reflections during an interview with New Zealand and British media in May 1975.

prospect from being realized, Thailand's role as the buffer state - and, crucially, America's unequivocal support for its Thai ally - against potential Vietnamese aggression would become a key rationale for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) effort to mobilize international condemnation of Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia. Needless to say, Singapore played a key part in that mobilization, which would involve persuading the United States to support ASEAN against not just Vietnamese aggrandizement, but importantly for the Singaporeans a Soviet-backed aggrandizement:

Singapore's strategic perspective was ostensibly influenced by the Soviet Union's support for the Vietnamese invasion. However, Singaporean calculations were even more subtle. Singapore believed that a stable balance of power in the region required the involvement of the United States. By presenting the Vietnamese action as an example of Soviet expansionism, it attempted to draw U.S. attention. Singapore still adhered to the domino theory of communist expansion ... Singapore regarded itself as highly vulnerable; it could not afford to lose the buffer states between it and Vietnam (Narine, 2002, p. 45).

However, convincing an America still reeling from its Vietnam experience that ASEAN needed U.S. backing did not prove easy. Initially disinterested in Southeast Asia, Jimmy Carter's administration sought closer ties with China, although it supported ASEAN in censuring the Vietnamese attack on Cambodia. This led the then Singaporean Foreign Minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam to assure U.S. President Carter that ASEAN was firmly "on the American side," rendering the organization "the hallmark" of Carter's Southeast Asia policy in the view of some (Fifield, 1979, p. 70; McMahon, 2003, p. 442). For example, as Cyrus Vance, the U.S. Secretary of State under Carter, has explained, a building block of America's post-Vietnam policy "was support of regional economic or political organizations that could bear an increasing role in maintaining stability in the world" - and ASEAN, in Vance's view, constituted "the outstanding example of such an organization" (Vance, 1983, p. 125). While President Ronald Reagan also considered ASEAN a model for regional cooperation and resilience and even declared his administration's support for ASEAN as the keystone of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia - for instance, Reagan once insisted that "support for and cooperation with ASEAN is a linchpin of American Pacific policy" - it did not translate into sustained high-level interest in the area, however (McMahon, 1999, pp. 198, 197). As Terry Deibel (1989, p. 38) has explained, "Reagan's reflexive anticommunism and cold war mentality caused him to view developing countries as irrelevant to American policy except as battlegrounds in the East-West struggle." In response, Lee Kuan Yew reminded the United States of its importance to the security and stability of Southeast Asia during a visit to Washington in April 1986:

Southeast Asians are more acutely aware of the uncertainties of U.S. policies than other regions of the world. They remember the American retrenchment in the 1970s followed by a decade of self-doubt. Hence ASEAN countries drew towards each other to seek greater strength in self-reliance. They found that together in ASEAN, they could better overcome their problems; but they still need the United States to balance the strength of the Soviet ships and aircraft. The renewal of self-confidence in America has reassured us that America will help maintain the peace and stability of the region. It is this balance of power which has enabled the free market economies to thrive (quoted in Acharya & Tan, 2006, pp. 37-8).

Be that as it may, U.S. efforts to operationalize the balance, which included the sale of selected weapons to China, were viewed with grave concern by Singapore, not least because it could embolden the Chinese to use force to settle disputes it might have with the ASEAN members. In a 1981 media interview, Lee registered his disquiet over the Reagan administration's sales policy, calling it "an admission that America has few options in maintaining the balance of power in East Asia" (quoted in Ang, 2013, p. 64). The Singaporean leader tellingly acknowledged that should U.S. weapons technology transfers not succeed in helping China develop a maritime capacity, "Southeast Asia can live with it." However, should they succeed, then the goal to maintain a regional balance would naturally "become more complicated" two or three decades downstream when China possesses the requisite power capabilities (Ang, 2013, p. 64). For Singapore, had America abnegated from its role as counterweight to both the Soviet Union and increasingly China, the world would be vastly different from (and presumably a lot less hospitable than) the present one. It had become evident that, well before the Cold War drew to a close, Singapore's view of the United States had shifted fundamentally since Lee's misgivings about the U.S. attitude and policy in the 1960s and 1970s. Much as the city-state's leaders rued America's failed effort in Vietnam, they conceded the long-drawn campaign furnished ASEAN and its member states the time and opportunities they otherwise would not have had to develop both the regional organization and their respective domestic economies. "The U.S. involvement in Vietnam bought precious time for the ASEAN countries to put their house in order and to lay the foundation for the grouping to develop into a cohesive organization," as Goh Chok Tong, Lee's designated successor as prime minister, acknowledged. "ASEAN economies began to take off, spurred by U.S. investments and a friendly American market" (quoted in Chew, 2009, p. 131).

A maturing partnership: The post-Cold War years

The immediate post-Cold War period was marked by Singapore's effort to ensure the continuation of an American forward presence in the Asia-Pacific in the light of the forced departure of U.S. forces from its bases in the Philippines in 1991 as the

combined result of the Philippine Senate's staunch nationalism and the volcanic eruption at Mount Pinatubo which damaged Clark Airbase. Urged to clarify its commitment to the region, the George H. W. Bush administration promoted the United States as an "Asian power" and identified its key post-Cold War goal for Asia as securing access to Asian markets, where a continued U.S. military presence would ensure regional stability, the precondition for the region's economic prosperity. "Our adaptation to new circumstances must not be interpreted as withdrawal," as Richard Solomon, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific from 1989-92, argued in August 1991. "America's destiny lies across the Pacific [and] our engagement in the region is here to stay" (Solomon, 1991). The self-image of the United States as an Asian power persisted under Bill Clinton's presidency, as attested by its East Asia Strategy Reports of 1995 and 1997 (McDevitt, 2002). That said, despite these allusions and assurances, the first decade of the post-Cold War era was also characterized by a vigorous academic and policy debate - underscored by tomes such as Paul Kennedy's (1987) effort, *The rise and fall of the great powers* - about the decline of American power even as the United States demonstrated its awesome military might in the First Gulf War by rolling Saddam Hussein and Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991.

America's apparent strategic paradox - a self-declared Pacific power that presumably can no longer lead the region - was clearly a key concern for Singapore. Speaking glowingly of a U.S.-led international order in which Japan rose to economic prosperity from the ashes of its war devastation, followed by the emergence of newly-industrializing economies including Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew - by then a "Senior Minister" who had relinquished the premiership to Goh Chok Tong - lamented in a 1992 address at the Harvard-Fairbank Center in New York that "[n]o alternative balance can be as comfortable as the present one with the U.S. as a major player. But if the U.S. economy cannot afford a U.S. role, then a new balance it will have to be." He nonetheless proceeded to warn: "However, the geopolitical balance without the U.S. as a principal force will be very different from that which it now is or can be if the U.S. remains a central player." Likewise, when explaining to the press Singapore's decision in 1991 to offer its naval facilities as a service cum transit point in support of U.S. naval operations, Lee, running the ruler over Japan and India as prospective regional security providers and finding them wanting, asked rhetorically, "[s]o why not stick with what has worked so far? The U.S. presence has maintained peace on the high seas of the Pacific since 1945. The American presence, in my view, is essential for the continuation of international law and order in East Asia" (quoted in Ang, 2013, p. 73). And should anyone wonder what a new Singaporean prime minister might mean for Singapore's approach to the United States, noted observers of the region such as Bernard K. Gordon were quick to insist that other than a possible change in

management style but not policy substance, “Lee’s departure from office will have no impact on U.S.–Singapore relations (Gordon, 1990/1991, p. 142).

The 1990s was also marked by the proliferation of new regional multilateral institutions aimed at facilitating dialogue and consultation in economic and political-security matters between ASEAN members and the association’s external dialogue partners. Despite a longstanding U.S. aversion to multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific – in marked contrast to its role as prime architect of the postwar global institutional order – the first President Bush supported American participation in the inaugural meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Canberra in 1989, while President Clinton shepherded the upgrading of APEC from a ministerial-level forum to a summit in 1993. The United States joined other Asia-Pacific countries to inaugurate the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994. For Singapore, those consultative mechanisms – including subsequent ones such as the East Asia Summit, which America (together with Russia) joined in 2011, as well as non-official forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue which meets annually in Singapore – play a vital role in establishing and ensuring the commitment and contributions of the great and regional powers, but especially the United States, to the peace, prosperity and security of the Asia-Pacific region. Even so, despite playing a vigorous part in building the region’s institutional architecture and working to maintain the centrality of ASEAN in that architecture, Singaporean leaders at best regarded it as an adjunct to a stable regional balance (a view shared by Leifer, 1996, p. 57). “Multilateral security dialogues can build understanding and confidence,” as Lee noted in 1993. “But they are no substitute for a stable balance of power” (quoted in Ang, 2013, p. 71). Yet as others have argued, the multilateral forums in themselves, whether planned or otherwise, also served as structures within which their members and stakeholders communally balance one another (Emmers, 2003; Tan, 2015b).

On the other hand, the 1990s might have encouraged some to see Singapore’s robust articulation of “Asian values” (Kausikan, 1993, 1997; Koh, 1999; Lee, 1992; Mahbubani, 1992) as indication that Singapore was more likely to bandwagon with China, its fellow apologist for Confucian values, than with the West including the United States (Roy, 1994). Likewise, Washington’s customary ritual of citing alleged human rights abuses in Singapore rendered in the U.S. Department of State’s annual Country Reports is another longstanding bone of contention between the two countries (for example, see Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012). According to a former permanent secretary of Singapore’s foreign ministry, Bilahari Kausikan (2014), the foray by Singaporean diplomats into the Asian values debate was driven by pragmatic considerations, namely, to help post-Tiananmen Square China shoulder the burden of international criticism and condemnation at the end of the Cold War. Whether Singapore’s contribution to Asian values amounted to a purely strategic exercise is debatable given its

gestation within the Singaporean context occurred well before the Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989 (Chua, 1998; Quah, 1999; Wee, 2007). It bears noting that Singapore registered grave concern over the crackdown by Beijing on the protests. Noting that he and his Cabinet colleagues were “shocked, horrified and saddened by this disastrous turn of events,” Lee Kuan Yew conceded that the Singapore leadership had expected, mistakenly as it turned out, that the Chinese government would have applied “the doctrine of minimum force...to quell civil disorder” (Lee, 1989). Yet Singapore ostensibly initiated the Asian values discourse to buy time and space for China by becoming the focal point of international attention.⁴ Taking credit for indirectly calming Sino-U.S. ties once cooler heads in Beijing and Washington prevailed, Kausikan claimed that at that point, the participation by Singaporean diplomacy in the values debate effectively ended, even as the debate was fuelled by inputs from the worlds of academia and punditry (Kausikan, 2014). Whatever the merits and even conceits of this rationalization, *ex post facto* or otherwise, it highlighted the Singaporean belief regarding the need to preserve a stable regional power balance through helping the great powers and their respective leaders readjust their foreign policies and – in the context of a China struggling to find its footing in a post-revolutionary setting and an America led by an untested Democrat president (Clinton) – re-establish stable ties with one another.

An indispensable partnership: The post-9/11 years

Ironically, Singapore’s incessant efforts to draw the wandering attention and focus of the world’s global power back to Southeast Asia were realized unexpectedly with the onset of America’s global “war on terror”, which arguably shaped U.S. grand strategy during the first decade of the twenty-first century and committed the United States to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, among other things. Southeast Asia became identified as the “second front” of the war on terror, courtesy of incidents such as the foiling of a terrorist plot in Singapore in December 2001 and the bomb attacks in Bali, Indonesia in October 2002 (Gersham, 2002; Acharya & Acharya, 2007; Ramakrishna & Tan, 2003). Al Qaeda – more accurately, its “local affiliate” in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) – had reportedly selected Singapore as its second iconic target following the attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, presumably because of the city-state’s close ties with the United States and the inviting presence of U.S. interests and military personnel based in Singapore (Lavin, 2012; Tan, 2005, p. 352). The capture of JI militants and would-be terrorists and the dismantlement of the JI terror network by Singaporean security services placed Singapore squarely in the war on terror

⁴ This logic is not dissimilar to how Singapore saw the Vietnam War as a crucial diversion which bought time and space for itself and other ASEAN members. See Prime Minister Goh’s reasoning as highlighted in Chew (2009, p. 131).

spotlight (Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, 2003; Abuza, 2005). Counterterrorism cooperation between the two countries added a new dimension to the growing Singapore-U.S. security partnership (Cheong & Ramakrishna, 2013).

As noted, Singapore reportedly declined U.S. President George W. Bush's offer in 2003 to assume the status of a major non-NATO ally of the United States, which Singaporeans regarded as a strategic disadvantage because geographical propinquity of major powers like the Soviet Union during the Cold War and China since the end of the Cold War, as well as territorial contiguity with Muslim-majority neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia, made unqualified intimacy with the United States a difficult political proposition (Leifer, 2000). Singapore opted instead to be a "major security cooperation partner of the United States" provided for under the SFA signed in July 2005 between Bush and Lee Hsien Loong. Reportedly born out of a shared desire to address common threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the SFA built on areas - already extensive - of bilateral defense and security cooperation. These include those sanctioned under the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in Singapore and its 1998 Addendum, which grant the U.S. military access to the air base at Paya Lebar, the Changi Naval Base (big enough to dock aircraft carriers even though Singapore does not own any), and the port of Sembawang in Singapore to where Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific (COMLOG WESTPAC) - the unit responsible for coordinating U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) military exercises - relocated in 1991 from the Philippines. These facilities were amply appropriated by U.S. forces en route to Afghanistan and for use in various war on terror operations.

With the war on terror having shifted from Afghanistan back to Iraq and Syria with the emergence in the Middle East of the grouping known variously as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or simply Islamic State (Dearden, 2014; Fuller, 2015), the reported presence of a number of Singaporeans, albeit relatively small, who have purportedly joined that group raises the grim prospect of the radicalization of locals and potential adverse consequences if or should those battle-hardened militants return home (Liow, 2014a, 2014b). The Singaporean authorities have committed to contributing some military assets - including liaison and planning officers, a KC-135R air-to-air refueling aircraft, and an imagery analysis team (Beng, 2014) - to the U.S.-led coalition in the fight against ISIS. The militaries of the two countries also engaged one another regularly through bilateral exercises such as Exercise Tiger Balm, a command post exercise focusing on peace support and stability operations involving Singapore's 9th Division and the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, maritime Exercise CARAT (Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training), and multilateral exercises such as Exercise Cope Tiger, a trilateral air exercise involving the

Singaporean, Thai and U.S. air forces, Exercise Cobra Gold, reportedly the largest Asia-Pacific military exercise involving 26 nations, and Exercise RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific), the world's largest multinational maritime exercise. The extent and depth of Singapore-U.S. security relations has arguably rendered the partnership into a core or vital one for both sides. As the younger Lee expressed at a dinner he hosted in honor of President Bush's visit to Singapore in November 2006:

Singapore and the U.S. are close friends and strategic partners. Our relationship is excellent and covers many areas, from trade to defense and counterterrorism. The friendship has endured because it is rooted in shared interests and compatible international perspectives ... America continues to play a vital role in Asia's stability and prosperity. You have important interests here that needs to be nurtured, amidst your many other commitments worldwide. Singapore looks forward to greater U.S. engagement in this part of the world, and I believe so do many other Southeast Asian countries. On the security front, Singapore has made common cause with the U.S. in combating the terrorist threat. The fight against terrorism is a long-term ideological struggle. The strength and resolve of the U.S., and especially of its Commander-in-Chief, is critical to sustaining this struggle, and prevailing in it. And in you, President Bush, America is fortunate to have a leader with the courage of conviction, and the tenacity to press ahead towards your objectives despite all difficulties. Your steadfast leadership has helped to anchor this effort to make the world a better and safer place for us all (quoted in Leong, 2007, p. 294).

Lee's remarks were no mere diplomatic niceties. More than any ASEAN member, Singapore has embraced Washington's approach to the war on terror. For example, it has been asserted that in contrast to the more circumspect views of Indonesia and Malaysia, Singapore was quick to endorse the U.S. view that terrorism in Southeast Asia was all part of Al Qaeda's international network (Fealy & Thayer, 2009, p. 214), hence subscribing, perhaps unwittingly, to the notion of an "Al Qaeda central" (Sude, 2010). "The Indonesian perspective (at least under the Megawati government) has diverged from the overly strategic view of terror held by Singapore and the U.S.," according to a noted analyst of the region. "Neither Malaysia nor Indonesia has acknowledged terrorism as an existential threat in the manner of Singapore, Australia or the United States" (Acharya, 2004, p. 2). The events of 9/11 only served to bind Singapore and the United States even closer together. As Andrew Tan has noted:

Singapore was quick to recognize the global significance and implications of these events, given its growing concern over the emergence of the so-called "new" or "postmodern" terrorism motivated by apocalyptic religious ideology. Singapore thus came out strongly to support the United States in its declaration of war against international terrorism. As Kishore Mahbubani, Singapore's then Ambassador to the United Nations, stated on

1 October 2001: "Americans are not alone in this fight against terrorism. Singapore stands with the United States and the international community in this struggle. This is a fight between people who stand for civilized society, and those out to destroy it" (Tan, 2005, p. 352; see also Tan, 2002).

A similar observation has been made by Amitav Acharya (2004, p. 2):

Singapore's perspective is largely in tune with the U.S. in so far as both see Islamic terrorism as the main danger to national and regional security. Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Security and Defence, Tony Tan, described terrorism as the most "immediate security threat" facing the region. In his view, "the new terrorism is a networked, multinational enterprise with a global reach which aims to inflict death and destruction on a catastrophic scale."

Yet this systematic congruence and coordination in counterterrorism and security policy did not stop the United States from censuring the Singaporeans for allegedly not doing enough. In May 2013, the U.S. Department of State released its *Country reports on terrorism 2012* which criticized Singapore's bilateral and multilateral engagement on counterterrorism intelligence and law enforcement cooperation as "inconsistent and marked by a transactional mindset that impeded the development of broad, deep, and predictable agency-to-agency relationships." Acknowledging that bilateral counterterror collaboration proved successful from time to time, the State Department report however concluded that "Singapore appeared to provide selective cooperation dependent upon the issue" (United States Department of State, 2013, p. 53). In response, the Singaporean government said it was "surprised and disappointed" by those comments, "particularly so given the close relationship and cooperation between our countries and agencies in the area of counterterrorism." Both the foreign and home affairs ministries of Singapore insisted that the State Department report not only furnished an inaccurate depiction of the relations that Singaporean security services have with their U.S. counterparts, but fundamentally misunderstood Singapore's "deep commitment" towards international cooperation (*TODAY*, 2013).

Notwithstanding these habitual irritants, Singapore has not wavered in its view about America's strategic importance to the region. For this reason, at the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue with Ashton Carter in attendance for the first time as U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lee Hsien Loong seized the opportunity to remind the United States that it remains, for all intents and purposes, the "key factor for peace and stability in the region" whose "core interest" remains the maintenance of Asia as a stable, secure and prosperous region (Lee, 2015).

Conclusion: Whither indispensability?

The United States cannot stop China's rise. It just has to live with a bigger China, which will be completely novel for the United States, as no country has ever been big enough to challenge its position. China will be able to do so in 20 or 30 years. Americans have to eventually share their preeminent position with China ... If the United States attempts to humiliate China, keep it down, it will assure itself an enemy. If instead it accepts China as a big, powerful, rising state and gives it a seat in the boardroom, China will take that place for the foreseeable future. So if I were an American, I would speak well of China, acknowledge it as a great power, applaud its return to its position of respect and restoration of its glorious past, and propose specific, concrete ways to work together (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Allison & Blackwill, 2013)

In his provocative book, *The China Choice*, the Australian strategic thinker Hugh White (2013) argued that the United States can no longer retain global primacy in the light of China's rising power and influence, but ought to share power with the latter in the management of world order. White's work generated intense debate within Australia and wide interest in Asia-Pacific strategic circles, not least because Australia, as a key security ally of the United States, has long viewed U.S. primacy as cardinal to its own security. However, Australia's growing economic interdependence with China raises fundamental questions for Australian analysts like White about their country's continued reliance on America for its security (White, 2011). The elder Lee's musings referenced in the preceding paragraph suggest that Singapore's leaders had long reached the conclusion about the need for power-sharing between America and China in the foreseeable future. Moreover, Singapore has long pursued strategic hedging in support of its advocacy for a stable regional balance – an approach which a formal alliance with the United States would have contradicted (Tan, 2015a).

Two events that took place near the end of 2014 underscore the political complexities Singaporeans face as a security partner of the United States. In December, the USS *Fort Worth*, a Freedom-class U.S. Navy Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), began a 16-month rotational deployment out of Singapore, picking up where its predecessor the USS *Freedom* left off. The deployment of the LCSs – neither based nor home-ported in Singapore, as the city-state's defense officials have insisted – has been seen by many as a clear indication of Singapore's robust support for America's rebalance or pivot to the Asia-Pacific strategy (Yang, 2014). In November on the other hand, the sight of Singapore Armed Forces soldiers conducting artillery and armored drills alongside their counterparts from the People's Liberation Army in Nanjing – Exercise Cooperation 2014 was the third such endeavor between Singapore and China, with earlier editions focused on counterterrorism (Tai, 2014) – raised eyebrows across the region over Singapore's perceived commitment to the Obama administration's rebalancing effort. To those

familiar with Singapore's propensity to hedge against the major powers, the seemingly contradictory spectacle of the city-state playing both sides, as it were, is not altogether surprising. As a strategy, hedging has arguably become more pronounced for Singapore in the post-Cold War geopolitical context of Asia, where uncertainty has taken the place of well-defined threats (Medeiros, 2005–06). In the present-day context, while rising tensions in the South China Sea have understandably led some states to pursue closer defense ties with Washington as a counterbalance to Chinese territorial claims and power, non-claimant states like Singapore have refrained from taking sides while urging for restraint from all concerned parties.

The implication of Singapore's hedging behavior should not be missed. In Singaporean eyes, the United States, as this study has shown, has evolved over the years from an unlikely collaborator and patron on whom they relied by default during the Cold War years to an invaluable partner today. To Singaporean minds, the United States has been and remains the indispensable counterweight against China, just as it did against the Soviet Union before. But unlike America's allies, Singapore has readily spoken up on behalf of the Chinese as and when it felt that was warranted – as Singapore Foreign Minister Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam demonstrated during a visit to Washington in early 2012, when Singapore felt that U.S. officials had engaged in gratuitous anti-China rhetoric (Matthew, 2012; Zhou, 2012). In other words, indispensability is not a permanent condition, and there are limits to the relationship. Is Singapore thereby inherently pro-America? Queried by Singaporean parliamentarians in 2004 on whether Singapore was excessively “pro-U.S.” in its support for the American-led invasion of Iraq, Singapore's then Foreign Minister Shunmugam Jayakumar responded: “I said we are not pro-U.S.; we are not anti-any country. What we are is that we are pro-Singapore in the sense that ultimately what guides us in our foreign policy is our national interest. And that remains our fundamental approach” (quoted in Tay, 2005).

Conversely, it is fair to say that despite Singapore's proclivity to hedge, the United States remains the city-state's default security choice should things go horribly wrong and well beyond the ability of Singapore's armed forces to manage. As Evelyn Goh (2008, p. 268) has suggested, although the regional rhetoric in Southeast Asia overtly advocates a balance of power among the major powers, the fact that many Southeast Asian policymakers favor the continued preponderance in their region of benign U.S. power implies the equilibrium in the distribution of power among great powers normally associated with power balances is not what Singapore (and other ASEAN members) actually hope for. But it also implies that for countries like Singapore for whom U.S. power is deemed indispensable to the stability and security of the region, their incessant promotion of a regional balance of power is an implicit legitimization of America's continued presence and leadership in Asia.

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