

Singapore's Survival and its China Challenge

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Singapore-China relations have deteriorated since 2010, due to Singapore's position over the disputed South China Sea and its support for the United States' strategy of 'rebalancing'. Singapore has been concerned with China's use of coercion instead of international law and arbitration to settle interstate disputes, as this undermines the very international system upon which small states depend on for survival. However, despite pressure from China to take its side, Singapore does still have room to manoeuvre as there are a number of larger countries which are concerned with China's attempts to dominate the region.

Singapore is an interesting case study of how China has begun to behave towards small states in the international system. As well, Singapore matters because of its strategic location astride the Strait of Malacca, the busiest waterway in the world, and the fact that it is an important global financial centre, and also has one of the largest ports in the world. More significantly, despite its small size, Singapore punches above its weight diplomatically. One reason has been the global respect that its founding father and statesman, Lee Kuan Yew, had established since Singapore's independence in 1965. Through Lee, Singapore's views have been heard at the highest political levels in the United States, Europe and Asia, including in China, a fact well-summed up by Harvard academic and doyen, Graham Allison, in his latest book on US-China relations, entitled, *Destined for War*.¹ Singapore is also important to China because it is due to be the next chair of ASEAN in 2018, where it will be in a position to steer Asia's premier regional organisation.²

Singapore and China have well-established political and economic relations but political relations have undergone a qualitative change since 2010, even as their economic relationship has prospered. China is today Singapore's largest trading partner, with Singapore's exports to China (including Hong Kong) totalling US\$84.4 billion in 2016.³ Yet, hitherto excellent relations

¹ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2017). Lee Kuan Yew is extensively quoted in this work.

² Tim Charlton, 'What to Expect from Singapore's 2018 ASEAN Chairmanship', *Singapore Business Review*, 8 May 2017, <sbr.com.sg/economy/news/what-expect-singapores-2018-asean-chairmanship> [Accessed 30 August 2017].

³ Daniel Workman, 'Singapore's Top Trading Partners', *World'sTopExports.com*, 22 April 2017, <www.worldstopexports.com/singapores-top-import-partners/> [Accessed 11 July 2017].

have deteriorated since 2010, due to a number of reasons, including Singapore's position over the disputed South China Sea, which has angered China. As Ja Ian Chong observed, Chinese commentary on online forums and op-eds have since increasingly taken a critical tone towards Singapore, including using derogatory phrases such as *wangben* ("forgetting its origins") and *hanjianguo* ("a country of Chinese traitors").⁴

This article focuses on the challenges that a rising and increasingly more assertive China poses to Singapore (a Chinese majority state), which have been accentuated due to perceived affinities of race, language and culture on the part of China. The article begins by examining strategies for small state survival and the sources of Singapore's security perceptions, which are fundamental to understanding Singapore's foreign policy approaches. It then outlines Singapore's strategy for survival, the Singapore-China relationship and why this relationship has deteriorated. It concludes with an assessment of how Singapore can meet its China challenge.

Small State Survival and Singapore's Security Perceptions

Small states in the international system by definition have less room to manoeuvre due to their lack of power. Indeed, a small state "cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities, and ... must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes, or developments to do so".⁵ According to the Commonwealth Secretariat, small states are vulnerable to a number of threats to their security. These include: threats to territorial security as a result of military and non-military incursions; threats to political security, including actions intended to influence a threatened state's national policies; and actions that could undermine its economic welfare. Small states, however, could take a number of measures to reduce their vulnerability, such as: the strengthening of national defence capabilities; entering into defence agreements with other states; underpinning security through economic growth; promoting internal cohesion; and adopting sound diplomatic policies at both bilateral and multilateral levels.⁶

More simply put, either a collective security system or a balance of power could ensure small state survival.⁷ Nationalism based on a strong national

⁴ Ja Ian Chong, 'Diverging Paths? Singapore-China Relations and the East Asian Maritime Domain', *Maritime Awareness Project*, 26 April 2017, <maritimeawarenessproject.org/2017/04/26/diverging-paths-singapore-china-relations-and-the-east-asian-maritime-domain/> [Accessed 11 July 2017].

⁵ Robert Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 29.

⁶ Commonwealth Secretariat, *Vulnerability: Small States in the Globalised Society* (London: the Secretariat, 1985), p. 23.

⁷ Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Security of Small States in the Third World* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982), pp. 37-39.

identity could also deter strong states.⁸ Another recommendation for enhancing small state survival is the exercise of soft power. In this respect, Singapore has converted its soft power in its political economy potential and as a model of good governance into “instruments for virtual enlargement”.⁹ As Michael Handel observed, small or weak states have internal sources of strength which they use to their advantage, and they could also draw on the strength of other great powers to further their own interests.¹⁰

As the following analyses show, Singapore has in fact adopted just such a multifaceted strategy to ensure its survival. Singapore is a small island-state with three significant geostrategic features which have informed its security perspectives and responses. The first is its strategic location, astride the busiest sea-lane in the world, namely, the Straits of Malacca, through which all trade between the Middle East and Europe on the one hand, and Northeast Asia on the other, must pass. Thus, as Singapore’s foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam observed in 1965, Singapore “is situated in a region of the world which has traditionally been the battleground of big power conflicts ... Singapore itself by virtue of its strategic location has attracted the attention of nations who wished to dominate Southeast Asia”.¹¹ Its strategic location has attracted the attention of the great powers. Indeed, until 1971, Britain maintained its largest naval base outside of the United Kingdom in Singapore. Today, the United States has a logistics facility in Singapore’s Changi Naval Base, where it also stations its latest littoral combat ships as well as P8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft.¹² In other words, Singapore matters because it is a strategic asset to any great power that wishes to have a presence in the region.

Singapore’s second geostrategic attribute is its location in the middle of the Malay archipelago, which has the world’s largest population of Muslims. Its population in 2016 is 5.6 million;¹³ 74.3 per cent of its population is ethnic Chinese, making it the only ethnic Chinese-dominated state outside of China

⁸ Walker Connor, ‘Ethnology and the Peace of South Asia’, *World Politics*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1968), p. 67.

⁹ Alan Chong, ‘Small Power Soft Power Strategies: Virtual Enlargement in the Cases of the Vatican City State and Singapore’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2010), p. 386.

¹⁰ Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1981), p. 51.

¹¹ Kevin Khoo, ‘On the Record: A Foreign Policy Outlined: S Rajaratnam Speaks at Singapore’s Admission to the U.N.’, National Archives of Singapore, 17 January 2017, <www.nas.gov.sg/blogs/offtherecord/singapore-joins-the-united-nations-s-rajaratnams-speech/> [Accessed 12 July 2017].

¹² Lynn Kuok, ‘The U.S.-Singapore Partnership: A Critical Element of U.S. Engagement and Stability in the Asia-Pacific’, Asian Alliances Working Paper Series, Paper 6, July 2016, Brookings Institution, pp.5-6, <www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Paper-6.pdf> [Accessed 12 July 2017].

¹³ World Bank, ‘Population 2016’, World Development Indicators database, 17 April 2017, <databank.worldbank.org/data/download/POP.pdf> [Accessed 12 July 2017].

if Taiwan is not counted as a state.¹⁴ More significantly, Singapore sits uncomfortably in a subregion where strong anti-Chinese sentiments exist. This was demonstrated by the deadly May 13 race riots in Malaysia and Singapore in 1969, and more recently in the 1998 anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia. Anti-Chinese sentiments remain strong in both countries, epitomised by racially-framed attacks in 2016 in Indonesia on the then Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is ethnic Chinese, and the anti-Chinese Malay nationalist sentiments that have been openly expressed in Malaysia in recent years.¹⁵

Singapore's third significant geostrategic attribute is its sheer small size, with around 600 square kilometres of land and no hinterland of its own. It is dependent on external trade, and external sources (particularly on its sometimes difficult neighbours) for its food and some of its water supplies. Its population of 5.6 million in 2016 is dwarfed by the almost 32 million in neighbouring Malaysia and 261 million in Indonesia.¹⁶ It has no strategic depth, and its heavy dependence on maritime commerce exposes it to coercion through a maritime blockade or interference with its long sea-lines of communications with its markets and sources of raw materials and energy.

Apart from its geostrategic attributes, Singapore's security perspectives have also been shaped by historical factors. A British Crown Colony, Singapore attained self-government in 1959 and joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, only to be expelled in 1965 as a result of intense political contestation with strong ethnic overtones. Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, vowed at the time that "Singapore will survive" but he was very much aware of the odds given the geostrategic realities that Singapore faced.¹⁷

The experience of Confrontation with Indonesia from 1963-65, the race riots that broke out in Malaysia and Singapore in May 1969, the massacre of communists in Indonesia after 1965 (many of ethnic Chinese origin) and tensions between Singapore and Malaysia after independence sharpened Singapore's sense of vulnerability and led to a siege mentality.¹⁸ Thus, in 1968, Singapore established its own armed forces with the help of Israel, as Singapore consciously adopted the Israeli model of deterrence, including

¹⁴ Ministry of Health (Singapore), 'Population and Vital Statistics', <www.moh.gov.sg/content/moh_web/home/statistics/Health_Facts_Singapore/Population_And_Vital_Statistics.html> [Accessed 12 July 2017].

¹⁵ Hew Wai Weng, 'A Rise in Anti-Chinese Rhetoric', *New Mandala*, 28 September 2016, <www.newmandala.org/rise-anti-chinese-politics-malaysia-indonesia/> [Accessed 12 July 2017].

¹⁶ World Bank, 'Population 2016'.

¹⁷ 'Prime Minister's Press Conference Held on 26 August 1965, at City Hall, Singapore', pp. 4, 11, <www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19650826.pdf> [Accessed 11 July 2017].

¹⁸ Andrew T. H. Tan, *Security Perspectives of the Malay Archipelago* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004), pp. 43-46.

universal conscription (for males), high defence spending and a pre-emptive defence strategy.¹⁹

Singapore's Strategy for Survival

Lee, who remained a dominant figure until he passed away in 2015, clearly subscribed to a stark reading of the Hobbesian world in which Singapore had to exist. As he stated in an interview with the *New York Times* in 2007, "can we survive? The question is still unanswered ... it depends on world conditions ... it doesn't depend on us alone".²⁰ Lee took the view that "if there were no international law and order, and big fish eat small fish and small fish eat shrimps, we wouldn't exist".²¹ Yet, Singapore's survival depended not just on international law and order but also on a balance of power. As he also stated at the same interview, "it's not just a matter for the United Nations Security Council ... there's the U.S. Seventh Fleet, a Japanese interest in the Straits of Malacca, and later Chinese and Indian interests in the region, and therefore a balance".²² Thus, in his study of Singapore's foreign policy in 2000, Michael Leifer stressed that Singapore has coped with its vulnerabilities by practising balance of power politics in its foreign relations. In particular, "the multiple involvement within the regional locale of important extra-regional states, especially the United States, has been encouraged as a practical way of coping with vulnerability and complementing a national defence capability".²³

Aside from balance of power however, Singapore has also utilised diplomacy and soft power instruments in pursuing its security relations, and has built a web of international, regional and bilateral relations. As a small island-state, Singapore is aware that it has to try to punch above its weight if it is to be heard regionally and internationally, and if its sovereignty and interests are to be respected and even defended by allies abroad. Singapore is a founding-member of ASEAN, has supported all major multilateral economic and political initiatives in the region, such as APEC and the ASEAN Regional Forum, and has been active on the global stage, such as through the Shangri-la Dialogue of defence officials which it organises, and its leadership of the Forum of Small States and the Global Governance Group.²⁴ This has enabled Singapore to punch above its weight internationally. For instance, as a leading member of the Global

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 75-76.

²⁰ *New York Times*, 'Excerpts from an Interview with Lee Kuan Yew', 29 August 2007, <www.nytimes.com/2007/08/29/world/asia/29iht-lee-excerpts.html> [Accessed 11 July 2017].

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 9, 26.

²⁴ Tommy Koh, 'Remembering Lee Kuan Yew: Our Chief Diplomat to the World', *Straits Times*, 25 March 2017, <www.straitstimes.com/singapore/remembering-lee-kuan-yew-our-chief-diplomat-to-the-world> [Accessed 13 July 2017].

Governance Group, Singapore is regularly invited to attend G20 meetings of major advanced and emerging economies.²⁵

Singapore has also not put its entire faith in external power balancing and diplomacy. It has also made every effort to develop its power and strengthen its own resilience. Its armed forces, which are modelled after the Israel Defence Forces, today possesses significant conventional air, land and naval capabilities and are widely recognised to be the most advanced in Southeast Asia. Its armed forces have also engaged in defence diplomacy, through which Singapore has established strong defence ties with a number of countries, for instance, the United States, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, France, Thailand and India.²⁶

Singapore has also paid particular attention to its economic and socio-political resilience. In 2016, Singapore's per capita income was about US\$53,000, with a GDP of US\$297 billion, which is almost the same in size as Malaysia, its much larger neighbour.²⁷ It is today one of the largest ports in the world and an important financial centre, making it a critical hub of the global economy. This gives key stakeholders in regional security a stake in Singapore's survival. More importantly, Singapore has taken care to build a Singaporean national identity in order to ensure a harmonious civil society, an important endeavour on account of historical ethnic animosities between the Chinese and the Malays in the region. Thus, despite the fact that three-quarters of the population are ethnic Chinese, deliberate steps have been taken to ensure that Singapore's national identity has been built around the use of English as the working language, and various laws regulate free speech to ensure that no race or religion would suffer discrimination or denigration.²⁸ In addition, to overly emphasise its Chineseness would make Singapore very unwelcome in the region, given the strong hostility towards Chinese in the Malay world in which Singapore is located. In fact, Singapore understood upon its founding, when the Cold War was at its height and China-supported communist insurgencies were threatening many states in the region, that its neighbours would never have tolerated a China-oriented Cuba on their doorstep. As Lee Kuan Yew observed in 1962, "Singapore,

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), 'G20', <www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/international_organisation_initiatives/g20.html> [Accessed 13 July 2017].

²⁶ Andrew T. H. Tan, 'Punching Above Its Weight: Singapore's Armed Forces and Its Contribution to Foreign Policy', *Defence Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2011), pp. 672-97.

²⁷ World Bank, 'Data: Singapore', <data.worldbank.org/country/singapore?view=chart> [Accessed 13 July 2017].

²⁸ For instance, The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill (1990), *Singapore Infopedia*, <eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1638_2010-01-31.html> [Accessed 13 July 2017].

with its predominantly Chinese population would, if independent on its own, become Southeast Asia's Israel with every hand turned against it".²⁹

Moreover, as Lee Kuan Yew explained, in exasperation and in terms that Singaporean Chinese can identify with, in an interview with an Australian journalist in March 1965 (before Singapore separated from Malaysia):

I am not in fact Chinese. I am in fact a Malaysian. I am by race Chinese. I am no more Chinese than you are an Englishman. ... I can't deny my ancestry. I am not ashamed of it ... [but] I've been brought up in a different milieu. I've gone through a different experience.³⁰

Finally, Singapore's leaders have never shied from taking tough decisions in the face of pressure by larger countries. For instance, Singapore went ahead and executed two Indonesian marines captured for sabotage activities during Confrontation in 1967, despite a personal appeal by President Suharto of Indonesia.³¹ In 1986, Singapore also refused to bow to Malaysian pressure to call off the visit of Israel's President Chaim Herzog; as Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated, "it's not the way to behave if you want to be taken seriously".³²

In 2016, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained how Singapore has been able to punch above its weight and thus defend its national interests on the global stage:

we have our own independent, carefully-thought-out stand. We cooperate with other countries but we make our own calculations, and that is what makes us credible, consistent, reliable, valuable to others, to ASEAN partners, to the powers—America, China, Europe. It has taken us a long time to build up this reputation and we have to be very careful to maintain it.³³

As a veteran Australian diplomat observed to the author in 2017, Singapore has indeed earned much respect on the international stage through the very tenacity in which it has defended its interests, in the face of larger

²⁹ Quoted in *The Guardian*, 11 September 1962 and cited in Michael Leifer, 'Israel's President in Singapore: Political Catalysis and Transnational Politics', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1988), p. 342.

³⁰ 'Transcript of an interview of Mr Lee Kuan Yew with a staff member of ABC, Alan Ashbolt, recorded in Canberra TV Studios on 17 March 1965', <www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19650317.pdf> [Accessed 13 July 2017].

³¹ Mohamed Effendy Abdul Hamid and Kartini Saparudin, 'MacDonald House Bomb Explosion', *Singapore Infopedia*, <eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_62_2004-12-17.html> [Accessed 13 July 2017].

³² 'I Knew of Herzog Visit from Papers', *Straits Times*, 15 December 1986, p. 1.

³³ Prime Minister's Office (Singapore), 'National Day Rally 2016 [Lee Hsien Loong Speech]', last updated 27 January 2017, <www.pmo.gov.sg/national-day-rally-2016> [Accessed 14 July 2017].

countries.³⁴ Thus, Singapore has been able to punch above its weight regionally and internationally.

Singapore-China Relations

Singapore has always taken great care in its relations with China. This is due both to historical suspicions in Southeast Asia of China on account of its support for communist subversion during the Cold War, and also the presence of racial animosities towards the economically successful overseas Chinese who have been long established in the region. As a Chinese-majority state, Singapore has therefore been anxious not to be perceived as a 'third China'. Thus, Singapore was the last of the ASEAN states to establish diplomatic relations with China, and only did so in 1990 after Indonesia had resumed normal relations with it.³⁵

However, even before formal relations were established, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had met with and formed close ties with China's Deng Xiaoping, who visited Singapore in 1978 and resolved to open up China after witnessing Singapore's governance model. Deng subsequently lauded the Singapore model, stating in 1992 that China "should learn from their experience, and we should do a better job than they do". Singapore and China signed a trade agreement in 1979 and trade representative offices were set up in 1981 in both countries. Singapore subsequently invested heavily in China, with the governments cooperating to establish the Suzhou Industrial Park in 1994, and the Tianjin Eco-City in 2008.³⁶ In 2016, Singapore and China established another joint project, the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative which is designed to support China's western region development strategy.³⁷

At the same time, as China normalised and deepened its ties with other Southeast Asian countries, Singapore became more confident of using its Chinese heritage to reap the benefits of China's rapidly growing economy. As Montsion noted, from around 1990, Singapore embarked on a "bolder commitment to China-centric Chineseness in daily life".³⁸ Knowledge of China has been promoted through measures such as curriculum reform and the recruitment of international students from China, with the objective of

³⁴ Michael Smith, personal communication, 11 July 2017.

³⁵ Chew Hui Min, 'Singapore-China Ties: 7 Things to Know About 25 Years of Diplomatic Relations', *Straits Times*, 4 November 2015, <www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-china-ties-7-things-to-know-about-25-years-of-diplomatic-relations> [Accessed 14 July 2017].

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Jeremy Koh, 'Singapore and China's Third G2G Project Gets Underway in Chongqing', *Channel News Asia*, 8 January 2016, <www.channelnewsasia.com/news/business/singapore-and-china-s-third-g2g-project-gets-underway-in-chongqi-8213744> [Accessed 14 July 2017].

³⁸ Jean Michel Montsion, 'Chinese Ethnicities in Neoliberal Singapore? State Designs and Dialect(ical) Struggles of Community Associations', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 37, no. 9 (2014), p. 1492.

establishing a 'gateway elite' that could serve as bridge to China.³⁹ Compared to the previous policy of de-emphasising Chineseness, Singapore now sought to inculcate familiarity with Chinese language and culture along with familiarity with the West, so that Singapore would now have a pool of global talent that could serve as a bridge between China and the West.⁴⁰ Singapore has also attempted to address its very low fertility rate and ageing population by opening itself up to substantial foreign migration, particularly from China. The population has thus grown rapidly, from 3 million in 1990 to 5.6 million in 2016.⁴¹ Official figures on the number of mainland Chinese who have emigrated to Singapore do not exist but Singaporean bloggers believe that there are around 1 million.⁴² The significant social and economic ties are reflected by the fact that China is today Singapore's largest trading partner, with Singapore's exports to China (including Hong Kong) totalling US\$84.4 billion in 2016.⁴³ Singapore is also one of the largest foreign direct investors in China; in 2015, for instance, it was the largest, with about US\$7 billion in FDI (foreign direct investments) in China.⁴⁴

Yet, despite a shared ethnicity as well as close cultural and economic ties with China, Singapore has in fact always practised a balance of power approach in its foreign policy, welcoming all powers to play a role in the region. This is a classic small state survival strategy, as this would provide it with opportunities to better manoeuvre in the essentially Hobbesian international system. In this respect, Singapore has developed a wide security network, with defence cooperation and military exercises with a number of countries, such as India, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Taiwan, the United States, and Singapore's Five-Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) partners, namely, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia.⁴⁵ Aware that a pure balance of power approach could lead to instability, Singapore has also invested heavily in its diplomacy, particularly in its active

³⁹ Jean Michel Montsion, 'Re-locating Politics at the Gateway: Everyday Life in Singapore's Global Schoolhouse', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 4 (2009), pp. 637-56.

⁴⁰ Brenda Yeoh and Serene S. A. Tan, 'Negotiating Cosmopolitanism in Singapore's Fictional Landscape', in Jon Binnie et al. (eds), *Cosmopolitan Urbanism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 146-68.

⁴¹ Department of Statistics (Singapore), *Population Trends 2016*, p. vi, <www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2016.pdf> [Accessed 14 July 2017].

⁴² See, for instance, *Everything Also Complain* (Blog), '1 Million Chinese Nationals in Singapore', 29 July 2011, <everythingalsocomplain.com/2011/07/29/1-million-chinese-nationals-in-singapore/> [Accessed 14 July 2017].

⁴³ Daniel Workman, 'Singapore's Top Trading Partners', *World'sTopExports.com*, 22 April 2017, <www.worldstopexports.com/singapores-top-import-partners/> [Accessed 11 July 2017].

⁴⁴ Ministry of Commerce (China), 'Statistics of FDI in China in January-December 2015', 22 January 2016, <english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/statistic/foreigninvestment/201602/20160201260821.shtml> [Accessed 14 July 2017].

⁴⁵ Tan, 'Punching Above Its Weight'. See also Andrew T. H. Tan, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements: The Continuing Relevance', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2008), pp. 285-302.

involvement in a number of multilateral forums and institutions, and the promotion of regional cooperation through instruments such as ASEAN.

Within this context, Singapore has developed a particularly close security relationship with the United States. Since independence in 1965, Singapore has regarded the United States as the most benign and trustworthy of the great powers, the presence of which has prevented interventionist powers from overthrowing legitimate governments in the region. According to Lynn Kuok, Singapore has become one of the United States' most committed partners in the region. This stems from "a deep-rooted insecurity about its external environment and a firm belief that the United States' presence helps to preserve Singapore's autonomy and options, as well as maintain the peace and stability that has undergirded the region's economic growth".⁴⁶

The security relationship has deepened since the end of the Cold War. In 1990, concerned that the United States would leave the region after the end of the Cold War and given the strong nationalist sentiments in the Philippines that would eventually lead to the closure of the US naval base at Subic Bay in 1992, Singapore signed an agreement enabling US forces to access its military facilities. This was followed by another agreement in 1998 that allowed the United States to use the vast Changi Naval Base that was built by Singapore and is large enough to accommodate aircraft carriers. In 2005 and in 2015, Singapore and the United States signed strategic cooperation agreements, which expanded the scope of cooperation to cover several key areas, namely, military, policy, strategic, technology and non-traditional security challenges, including counter-terrorism.⁴⁷

The US Navy today maintains a logistical command unit in Singapore that coordinates US warship deployment and logistics in the region. US combat aircraft are also rotated to Singapore and naval vessels, including aircraft carriers, make regular port calls. From 2013, the US Navy has based four of its latest littoral combat ships (LCS) in Singapore.⁴⁸ In 2015, the United States also began the deployment of its new P8 Poseidon anti-submarine warfare aircraft in Singapore, a move which China criticised as part of the attempt by the United States to militarise the South China Sea.⁴⁹ Access to Singapore's facilities has enabled the US military to deal quickly with contingency situations in the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, Korean Peninsula

⁴⁶ Kuok, 'The U.S.-Singapore Partnership', p.1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁸ Emma Chanlett-Avery, *Singapore: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report for Congress, RS20490 (Congressional Research Service, 26 July 2013), pp. 3-4, <fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS20490.pdf> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁴⁹ Yunbi Zhang and Weihua Chen, 'China Opposes US Sending of Spy Plane to Singapore', *ChinaDaily.com.cn*, 9 December 2015, <www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015-12/09/content_22671358.htm> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

and Somalia.⁵⁰ As a close strategic partner, Singapore has been able to procure sophisticated US-made weapons systems for its armed forces. Its air force, for instance, deploys F15 Strike Eagle and F16C/D combat aircraft, KC-135 air tankers, Apache helicopter gunships and Chinook heavy helicopters.⁵¹

Singapore was also the first Asian country to join the Container Security Initiative (CSI) in 2003, and was a founding member of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), both US-led initiatives. Singapore has also been a strong supporter of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the centrepiece of the Obama Administration's economic rebalance to Asia.⁵²

Singapore's foreign policy strategy and its objectives have been consistent over the years, due to the geostrategic realities it has faced since its independence in 1965, and the fact that they have been maintained by the same government which has been in power since. The problem, however, has been the dramatic economic and military rise of China in recent years. This has led to China's changing perceptions of its regional and global role, and has been epitomised by its aggressiveness since the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, when it began to assert itself abroad. Since then, China's assertive moves in the East and South China Seas over disputed maritime territory have challenged the United States' dominant position in Asia, leading to rising tensions between the two great powers. More seriously, under power transition theory, war is most likely when a dissatisfied challenger increases in strength and begins to overtake the dominant power, in what is also known as the Thucydides Trap.⁵³

Underpinning the rising confidence and assertiveness on the part of China has been the rise in nationalism, which the ruling communist party has consciously cultivated to bolster its legitimacy. This was epitomised by Liu Mingfu's popular nationalistic work in 2010, *China Dream*, which asserts that China's goal should be to displace the United States as the world's pre-eminent power.⁵⁴ In 2012, China's President Xi Jinping also promoted his version of the Chinese Dream, which he defined as "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", through which China would become a prosperous and advanced country.⁵⁵ In Southeast Asia, China's newfound confidence

⁵⁰ Ministry of Defence (Singapore), 'Factsheet—Singapore-US Defence Relations', 29 May 2005, <www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/official_releases/nr/1998/jan/15jan98_nr/15jan98_fs.html> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁵¹ International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2017* (London: IISS, 2017), p.328.

⁵² Chanlett-Avery, *Singapore: Background and U.S. Relations*, pp. 3-4.

⁵³ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 376.

⁵⁴ See Mingfu Liu, *China Dream: The Great Power Thinking and Strategic Positioning of China in the Post-American Age* (Beijing: China Friendship Publishing Company, 2010, in Chinese).

⁵⁵ Xi Jinping, 'Speech at "The Road to Rejuvenation"', 29 November 2012, <chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2012/11/29/speech-at-the-road-to-rejuvenation/> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

has been epitomised by its aggressive moves to claim control and sovereignty over the entirety of the South China Sea, even though its claim overlaps with territory claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia. It has done this by reclaiming land and building bases on the islands in the disputed area, as well as through measures such as authorising its coastguard to board and search foreign vessels found in the disputed area.⁵⁶ The United States has challenged China's expansive claims through US Navy FONOPs (freedom of navigation operations) in the South China Sea.⁵⁷ In addition, the United States also took steps to strengthen its alliances and enhance its military presence in the region under the 'Asia pivot' (subsequently relabelled as 'rebalancing') which was announced with some fanfare by President Obama in Australia in 2011.⁵⁸ China has, however, perceived 'rebalancing' to be a containment strategy aimed at it.⁵⁹

China's rising confidence, the result of the rapid development of its economic and military power, as well as rising nationalism, has led it to attempt to assert its power over smaller countries in East and Southeast Asia. In 2010, at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Vietnam, for instance, China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi declared that "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact", when some ASEAN states objected to China's expansive claims in the South China Sea and wanted the United States to play a more active role over the dispute. Reportedly, he stared at Singapore's then foreign minister, George Yeo, when saying this, who reportedly stared back.⁶⁰ China's increasingly muscular approach in its foreign policy was epitomised by its tense stand-off with Vietnam in 2014 when it moved a large oil-drilling platform, accompanied by eighty vessels, to a location 220 km off the coast of Vietnam, within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone.⁶¹ This sparked anti-

⁵⁶ Kai Yee Chan, 'China Apprehending Boats Weekly in Disputed South China Sea', *China Daily Mail*, 7 March 2014, <chinadaily.com/2014/03/07/china-apprehending-boats-weekly-in-disputed-south-china-sea> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁵⁷ BBC News, 'South China Sea: US Warship Sails Near Disputed Reef', 10 May 2016, <www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36255646> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁵⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Text of Obama's Speech to Parliament', 17 November 2011, <www.smh.com.au/national/text-of-obamas-speech-to-parliament-20111117-1nkcw.html> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁵⁹ Shannon Tiezzi, 'Why Obama's Asia Tour Is Bad News for China', *The Diplomat*, 23 April 2014, <thediplomat.com/2014/04/why-obamas-asia-tour-is-bad-news-for-china/> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁶⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick, 'The Belligerents', *New Republic*, 27 January 2011, <newrepublic.com/article/82211/china-foreign-policy> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁶¹ David Stout, 'In the South China Sea, China Is Already Acting Like a Superpower', *Time*, 8 May 2014, <time.com/91934/china-vietnam-south-china-sea-oil-rig-paracel/> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

Chinese riots in Vietnam, damage to Chinese-owned factories and businesses, and the evacuation of Chinese nationals from the country.⁶²

China's rise and its growing global economic presence is reflected in its 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative, which stems from the overland 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the '21st-Century Maritime Silk Road' concepts formulated by President Xi Jinping in 2013. OBOR includes major infrastructure projects, such as railways, roads, ports, energy systems and telecommunications networks. However, it is clear that OBOR serves China's economic interests, and there are fears that it would lead to the economic domination of smaller countries by China.⁶³

The Deterioration in Singapore-China Relations

Singapore has invariably been caught in the rising tensions between the two great powers given its strong economic ties with China and its robust security relationship with the United States, a challenge not dissimilar to other Asia-Pacific states, such as South Korea, Japan and Australia. As Ja lan Chong observed, Singapore's delicate balancing act is only possible if there is significant overlap in interests between China, the United States and itself. However, the United States' retreat from the TPP and its seeming disengagement with institutionalised multilateral cooperation in the region following Donald Trump's inauguration as President in January 2017 has resulted in less room for Singapore to manoeuvre between the two great powers.⁶⁴

In particular, Singapore is concerned over China's increasing consolidation of control over the South China Sea, as control over important sea-lanes traversing those waters could enable China to pressure trade-dependent Singapore.⁶⁵ Singapore has one of the world's largest ports, and depends on unimpeded access to sea-lines of communications for its economic survival. Thus, despite the fact that it is not a claimant state and has no direct territorial dispute with China, it has taken a robust position on the issue, much to China's anger.

A key turning point in the South China Sea dispute was China's open assertion of its sovereignty over the entirety of the area in 2009. China then backed this up by the expansion of its patrols in the South China Sea. This led to an open declaration at the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Vietnam in 2010 by the United States, responding to requests by several

⁶² Reuters, 'Vietnam Stops Anti-China Protests After Riots, China Evacuates Workers', 18 May 2014, <www.reuters.com/article/us-china-vietnam-idUSBREA4H00C20140518> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁶³ Geoff Wade, 'China's "One Belt, One Road" Initiative', *Parliament of Australia*, n.d., <www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook45p/ChinasRoad> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁶⁴ Chong, 'Diverging Paths?'

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

ASEAN states, that the freedom of navigation over the area was a matter of the national interest of the United States. It was this intervention which led to China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's staring incident with Singapore's foreign minister described above, as clearly, Singapore had sided with the claimant states. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, in its decision over the dispute which was lodged by the Philippines against China's objections, rejected almost all of China's claims. China responded by refusing to recognise the verdict.⁶⁶

In July 2016, while making clear that Singapore had no position on the merits of the specific territorial claims, Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan stated that overlapping sovereignty claims in the South China Sea should be settled "in accordance with international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)", and that "all parties should refrain from provocative behaviour that could raise tensions in the South China Sea".⁶⁷ This was in effect open support for the arbitration tribunal's ruling on the issue.

Significantly, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong openly touched on the South China Sea in his speech to the nation at the National Day Rally in 2016. According to Lee:

Singapore must support and strive for a rules-based international order. We have to depend on words and treaties. They mean everything to us. We cannot afford to have international relations work on the basis that might is right. If rules do not matter, then small states like Singapore will have no chance of survival.

Further, Lee pointed out that it was important that disputes in the South China Sea do not affect the freedom of navigation or overflight by ships or aircraft. Lee made clear that Singapore had to take a stand based on its own interests and that "we cannot succumb to pressure".⁶⁸

Singapore has also been deeply concerned with China's ability to divide ASEAN over the South China Sea issue.⁶⁹ ASEAN's failure to issue a joint communique at the 45th ASEAN meeting of foreign ministers in Cambodia in

⁶⁶ Kei Koga, *Renewed Strategic Dynamics Over the South China Sea: Options for US, Japan, India*, National Asian Security Studies Program Issue Brief no. 6.3 (Canberra: UNSW Australian Defence Force Academy, December 2016), pp. 5-6, <www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/nassp-pdf/6.3%20Renewed%20Strategic%20Dynamics%20over%20the%20South%20China%20Sea.pdf> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁶⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), Press Release: Transcript of Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan's Reply to the Parliamentary Question and Supplementary Question, 11 July 2016, <www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media_centre/press_room/pr/2016/201607/press_20160711_2.html> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁶⁸ Prime Minister's Office (Singapore), 'National Day Rally 2016 [Lee Hsien Loong Speech]'.

⁶⁹ Straits Times, 'Diplomats Voice Concern Over China's "Bid to Divide ASEAN"', 26 April 2016, <www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/diplomats-voice-concern-over-chinas-bid-to-divide-asean> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

July 2012, the first time this had happened in ASEAN's history, was a development which shocked Singapore.⁷⁰ As Singapore's Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam stated in August 2012:

Building a strong, cohesive and autonomous ASEAN remains a key goal of our foreign policy ... an ASEAN that is not united and cannot agree on a Joint Communiqué will have difficulties in playing a central role in the region. If we cannot address major issues affecting or happening in our region, ASEAN centrality will be seen as a slogan without a substance. Our ability to shape regional developments will diminish.⁷¹

Apart from clearly divergent positions on the South China Sea, Singapore has also angered China by its embrace of the United States. As Prime Minister Lee explained in a BBC interview in February 2017:

For more than 30 years now, we have hosted American aircraft and ships, in the region, which pass through and stop in Singapore. It is the right thing for us to do because we believe that the American presence in the region is positive for the region, and the security presence is positive for the region. It has brought about stability. It has enabled countries to prosper and to compete peacefully. Therefore, we believe it is in our interest to be helpful to the Americans.⁷²

It is this view of the indispensability of the United States, particularly in the face of China's rise, that explains Singapore's welcome of the Asia pivot or 'rebalancing' which President Obama announced in 2011. This was reflected by the stationing of US navy vessels in Singapore in 2013 and P8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft in 2015, as well as the enhanced defence cooperation agreement in 2015 that deepened already close bilateral security cooperation.

China has thus concluded that Singapore is more of a US ally and less of a neutral actor.⁷³ This has led to several recent incidents and developments which suggest that the relationship has deteriorated. The first was a public debate between Singapore's ambassador to China and the *Global Times*, the conservative Chinese Communist Party newspaper. The *Global Times* claimed in September 2016 that Singapore made a failed attempt to add an endorsement of the South China Sea arbitration ruling at the Non-Aligned

⁷⁰ BBC, 'Asean Nations Fail to Reach Agreement on South China Sea', 13 July 2012, <www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18825148> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁷¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), Singapore Minister's Comments in Parliament on ASEAN and South China Sea: Transcript of Minister for Foreign Affairs K. Shanmugam's Reply to the Parliamentary Questions, 13 August 2012, <www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/phnom_penh/press_statements_speeches/embassy_news_press_releases/2012/201208/Press_13082012.html> [Accessed 17 July 2017].

⁷² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), 'Transcript of PM Lee Hsien Loong's Interview with BBC HARDtalk', 23 February 2017, <www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media_centre/press_room/pr/2017/201702/press_201702232.html> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁷³ Lieke Bos, 'Why is China Playing Hardball with Singapore?' *The Diplomat*, 9 December 2016, <thediplomat.com/2016/12/why-is-china-playing-hardball-with-singapore/> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

Movement meeting in Venezuela, sparking a testy exchange with Ambassador Stanley Loh. China's foreign ministry also intervened with remarks that supported the *Global Times*.⁷⁴ This was followed by a suggestion by an influential Chinese defence adviser that Singapore should be made to pay the price for seriously damaging China's interests.⁷⁵

This incident was followed by China's decision in November 2016 to impound nine armoured vehicles belonging to the Singapore Armed Forces when they transited Hong Kong on the way back from a military exercise in Taiwan. China followed this up with a formal protest over Singapore's military ties with Taiwan, over which it has long been unhappy.⁷⁶ China then failed to invite Singapore's Prime Minister to its landmark Belt and Road Summit in May 2017, despite Singapore's unequivocal support for the initiative from its inception.⁷⁷ This means that Singapore could potentially miss out on the multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects involved in the initiative.

More seriously, the *Global Times* has highlighted China's participation in the massive Port Klang project in Malaysia, and the proposal to develop the Kra Canal through southern Thailand. These projects would deal a 'fatal blow' to the United States and Singapore.⁷⁸ The increasing vitriol directed at Singapore can also be partly attributed to the widely held perception in China that Singapore is a Chinese state and should therefore naturally support China's position. Thus, according to veteran diplomat Bilahari Kausikan:

China seems to have great difficulty in accepting Singapore as a multiracial meritocracy ... Chinese officials, sometimes at very senior levels, constantly refer to Singapore as "a Chinese country" and ask for our "understanding"—by which I suspect they mean "agreement"—of their policies on that basis. Of course, we politely, but clearly and firmly, point out that we are not a Chinese country and that we have our own national interests that we cannot

⁷⁴ Jeevan Vasagar and Christian Shepherd, 'South China Sea Spat Exposes Singapore-Beijing Strains', *Financial Times*, 28 September 2016.

⁷⁵ *Straits Times*, 'China Should Make Singapore Pay over South China Sea Dispute, Says PLA Adviser', 1 October 2016, <www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-should-make-singapore-pay-over-south-china-sea-dispute-says-pla-defence-adviser> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁷⁶ Cal Wong, 'China Protests Singapore's Military Exercises with Taiwan', *The Diplomat*, 29 November 2016, <thediplomat.com/2016/11/china-protests-singapores-military-exercise-with-taiwan/> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁷⁷ Angela Han, 'How China Snubbed Singapore at the Belt and Road Summit', *The Interpreter*, 18 May 2017, Lowy Institute, <www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/how-china-snubbed-singapore-belt-and-road-summit> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁷⁸ *Global Times*, 'Three Reasons Which Explain Singapore's Pro-U.S. Anti-China Sentiment' (in Chinese), 30 September 2016, <news.ifeng.com/a/20160930/50049864_0.shtml> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

compromise without grievous and probably irreversible internal and international damage.⁷⁹

The feelings of hostility, however, appears mutual. The large numbers of recent migrants to Singapore from China have evoked strong emotions against the mainland Chinese, which are evident in highly negative postings on media and online forums in Singapore. As the *New York Times* observed, “the visible influence of China in the everyday lives of Singaporeans has sharpened their sense of identity as Singaporean rather than as descendants of Chinese mainlanders”.⁸⁰

Conclusions: Meeting Singapore’s China Challenge

The pressure that Singapore has been facing from China to support its foreign policy interests was epitomised by an unusual public debate between influential semi-retired diplomats. In July 2017, referring to the Qatar crisis, Kishore Mahbubani advocated that “small states must always behave like small states”, arguing as well that Singapore should have exercised discretion when commenting on matters involving the great powers, such as on the arbitration tribunal’s judgement over the South China Sea. Mahbubani also argued that Singapore should invest more in ASEAN and cherish the United Nations.⁸¹ He was openly criticised by other senior semi-retired diplomats. Bilahari Kausikan opined that “independent Singapore would not have survived and prospered if they always behaved like the leaders of a small state”, and that while Singapore recognised the asymmetries of size and power, “that does not mean we must grovel or accept subordination as a norm of relationships”.⁸² Another senior official, Ong Keng Yong, a former secretary-general of ASEAN, opined as well that if Singapore did not stand up for its interests, it “will encourage more pressure from those bigger than ourselves”. He also made the point that it is against Singapore’s well-being if international relations are decided on the basis of a country’s size.⁸³

⁷⁹ Bilahari Kausikan, ‘What China’s Rise Means for South-east Asia and Overseas Chinese’, *Today*, 9 April 2015, <www.todayonline.com/chinaindia/china/what-chinas-rise-means-south-east-asia-and-overseas-chinese> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁸⁰ Tash Aw, ‘Being Chinese in Singapore’, *New York Times*, 12 February 2015, <www.nytimes.com/2015/02/13/opinion/tash-aw-being-chinese-in-singapore.html> [Accessed 14 July 2017].

⁸¹ Kishore Mahbubani, ‘Qatar: Big Lessons from a Small Country’, *Straits Times*, 1 July 2017, <www.straitstimes.com/opinion/qatar-big-lessons-from-a-small-country> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁸² Bilahari Kausikan, ‘Singapore Cannot be Cowed by Size’, *Straits Times*, 3 July 2017, <www.straitstimes.com/opinion/singapore-cannot-be-cowed-by-size> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁸³ Nur Asyiqin Mohamed Salleh, ‘Minister Shanmugam, Diplomats Bilahari and Ong Keng Yong Say Prof Mahbubani’s View on Singapore’s Foreign Policy Flawed’, *Straits Times*, 2 July 2017, <www.straitstimes.com/singapore/prof-kishore-mahbubanis-view-on-singapores-foreign-policy-deeply-flawed-ambassador-at> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

In sum therefore, Singapore has been concerned with certain aspects of China's foreign policy behaviour which have serious implications for it. The first is the use of coercion and force instead of international law and arbitration to settle interstate disputes. This undermines the very international system upon which small states depend on for survival. This could invite future pressure from its much larger neighbours which have in the past been hostile to Singapore on account of its Chinese majority. Singapore is also very concerned with China's attempts to divide ASEAN, as this undermines the very regional organisation which has contributed to regional stability. In August 2017, Singapore's expulsion of a prominent Chinese academic on grounds that he had been an agent of influence allegedly working to influence Singapore's foreign policy and public opinion at the behest of foreign intelligence agencies brought home another serious concern: that of China's 'Information Warfare', which is aimed at shaping the perceptions and thought processes of external actors.⁸⁴ This strategy is similar to Chinese communist united front activities during the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s, which was aimed at shaping societal perceptions as well as the subversion of the state. This is a concern also shared by Singapore's allies, such as Australia, where there has been growing evidence of activities aimed at infiltrating Australian political and foreign affairs circles, as well to gain more influence over the nation's growing Chinese population.⁸⁵

In meeting the challenge that China poses to Singapore, however, there are clear dangers involved. China is Singapore's largest trading partner, and as such could use economic instruments to coerce Singapore, as it has already done by threatening to leave Singapore out of its OBOR initiative and investing heavily in ports in Malaysia that could undermine Singapore's economic prosperity which is derived from its maritime trade.

More seriously, China holds a special challenge for Singapore as it could also appeal to the nationalism of the up to 1 million mainland Chinese who now live in Singapore, many of whom have taken up permanent residency or citizenship, as well as to the ethnic identity of Singaporean Chinese who constitute the majority of the population. Indeed, Xi Jinping, in his Chinese Dream speech in 2012, made clear that the lofty goal is the ultimate vision of China's sons and daughters, using a term that includes those within the

⁸⁴ Jun Mai, 'Chinese-American Professor and his Wife to be Expelled from Singapore', *South China Morning Post*, 4 August 2017, <www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2105475/chinese-professor-and-his-wife-be-expelled-singapore> [Accessed 30 August 2017]. See also Paul Coyer, 'Chinese Information Warfare: Leveraging the Power of Perception', *Forbes*, 13 October 2015, <www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/10/13/chinese-information-warfare-and-sino-american-rivalry/#5ff92f21703b> [Accessed 31 August 2017].

⁸⁵ Nick McKenzie, Chris Uhlmann, Richard Baker, Daniel Flitton and Sashka Koloff, 'ASIO Investigation Targets Communist Party Links to Australian Political System', *Four Corners*, ABC News, 6 June 2017, <www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-05/asio-china-spy-raid/8589094> [Accessed 30 August 2017].

country and overseas.⁸⁶ This explains why China has been discussing the concept of the 'Ethnic Chinese Card', which would allow overseas-born ethnic Chinese to stay in China for as long as they wanted without a visa or residence permit, with the holders enjoying the same rights as Chinese citizens except for political rights.⁸⁷ This appeal to ethnic identity, which China had previously abandoned in order to re-establish relations with Southeast Asian states following the end of the Cold War, poses serious dangers as it could potentially undermine the largely successful process of the integration of overseas Chinese in the region as well as revive Cold War fears of Chinese fifth-columnists.

What then can Singapore do to meet its China challenge? As Prime Minister Lee himself explained, the central challenge that Singapore faces is this: "if America-China relations become very difficult, our position becomes tougher because then we will be coerced to choose between being friends with America and being friends with China".⁸⁸

The academic literature suggests that hedging is the preferred strategy adopted by most Southeast Asian states, including Singapore.⁸⁹ Hedging is aimed at cultivating "a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another".⁹⁰ Other strategies include balancing, which is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat, and bandwagoning, which refers to the alignment with the source of danger.⁹¹ However, as this paper has also attempted to demonstrate, the foreign policies of small states such as Singapore do not in fact fall neatly into these academic categories. Singapore's foreign policy behaviour can be described as hedging in the sense that while it has cultivated close cultural and economic ties with China, it has also developed a close security relationship with the United States. It could be described as soft balancing, as it seeks to align more closely with the United States, though not entirely, as a counter to a rising China.

Apart from such realist instruments of foreign policy, Singapore's emphasis as well on regional norms and institutions, such as through ASEAN and other multilateral regional forums, could also be described as constructivist in approach. Writing on Taiwan-China relations, one constructivist scholar

⁸⁶ Xi Jinping, 'Speech at "The Road to Rejuvenation"'.

⁸⁷ Junlu Jiang and Xiu Pei, 'The "Ethnic Chinese Card" is Coming!' *KWM.com*, n.d., <www.kwm.com/en/cn/knowledge/insights/the-ethnic-chinese-card-is-coming-20170216> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁸⁸ Nyshka Chandran, 'Singapore PM Offers Blunt Assessment of US Relationship', *CNBC.com*, 28 February 2017, <www.cnbc.com/2017/02/28/singapore-pm-on-us-china-relationship-we-must-choose-sides.html> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁸⁹ See, for instance, Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2008), pp. 159-85.

⁹⁰ Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Strategies*, Policy Studies, no. 16 (Washington: East-West Center Washington, 2005), p. 41.

⁹¹ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 17.

asserted that the answer to the security dilemma in that relationship could be found in “the social interactions and cultural norms that shape common identities, while the interests of the state can facilitate intersubjective (or shared) understandings conducive to the improving of cross-straits relations”.⁹² As the current tensions in the Taiwan Strait demonstrate, however, the shared identity project has been a failure, as the most important factor affecting stability has been the growing asymmetry of power between China and Taiwan, not their shared identity.⁹³ Thus, the failure of ASEAN to act with one voice on external powers such as China, even as it encroaches on territory in Southeast Asia, should give caution against any over-reliance on or unrealistic constructivist expectations of regionalism and regional institutions.

The answer to Singapore’s dilemma lies in an accurate reading of geopolitics. Has Singapore’s fundamental geostrategic vulnerabilities been ameliorated over time or does Singapore still face many of the same vulnerabilities that it did when it became independent in 1965? Does the rise of China mean that it will establish either regional or even global hegemony, leaving small states such as Singapore with little room to manoeuvre?

The answer to the first question is obvious. The failure of ASEAN in dealing with security issues that impinge on the sovereignty of regional states point to the limits of ASEAN regionalism and the fact that self-help, not reliance on multilateral norms, remains the practical means by which states could deal with external threats. The problem for Singapore is also that anti-Chinese sentiments in Malaysia and Indonesia have not in fact abated, as events such as the anti-Chinese riots in 1998 in Indonesia and the racial tensions in Malaysia have demonstrated. Compared to 1965, Singapore today has far greater political and social stability, a strong armed forces and a prosperous economy. Nonetheless, its fundamental vulnerabilities stemming from its small size and ethnic composition in the middle of a vast Malay sea remain. This means that Singapore must still continue to make the extra effort not to be perceived as a Chinese state.

The answer to the second question is slightly more complex. The end of the Cold War and the diminution of America’s global role and standing has left the international system today resembling more like nineteenth-century Europe, with its unstable and shifting balance of powers.⁹⁴ Despite its rise, China does not possess the attributes to become the world’s dominant

⁹² Max Tsung-Chi Yu, ‘A Constructivist Take on the Strait’, *New Atlanticist*, 15 June 2009, <www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-constructivist-take-on-the-strait> [Accessed 18 July 2017].

⁹³ See Andrew T. H. Tan, ‘A New Era in Taiwan Politics and its Implications’, *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2017), pp. 116-39.

⁹⁴ See Coral Bell, *The End of the Vasco da Gama Era: The Next Landscape of World Politics* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2007).

power in the way the United States was from 1945 until recently. This is because it is not able to offer a genuinely new political, economic and social model for others to emulate, nor does it in fact have global military capabilities.⁹⁵ However, China will continue to attempt to dominate its own strategic backyard and is likely to be able to consolidate control over the South China Sea.

Regionally, despite the United States' retreat from its global role under Donald Trump, there remains several large states in the Asia-Pacific which have serious reservations over China's attempts to dominate the region. Apart from the United States, they include India, Japan, Australia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Indonesia. This means that small states such as Singapore will still have room to manoeuvre within the context of a soft balancing strategy, although there will be short to medium-term costs to defying an assertive China.

Apart from a foreign policy challenge however, Singapore in fact faces an equally serious domestic challenge from China as well. This stems from the pull of Chinese nationalism and China's appeal to ethnic chauvinism, which poses potential risks to the harmonious multiracial society that is the bedrock of Singapore's domestic stability and prevents any interference by its neighbours. In the face of substantial mainland Chinese emigration, China's 'Information War' activities aimed at infiltrating and influencing Singapore society and its decision-makers are also a serious concern. This means that Singapore must pay careful attention to strengthening its social resilience through a renewed and concerted effort at building and sustaining a strong multiracial, Singaporean national identity. It also needs to revive the lessons it had learnt in dealing with Chinese communist united front tactics in the 1950s during the Malayan Emergency, and strengthen its internal security and counter-intelligence capabilities to deal with the threat. In dealing with this new threat, Singapore can take heart from the fact that it has in the past successfully dealt with Chinese communist subversion.

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⁹⁵ Andrew T. H. Tan, 'Why China is Not a Global Power', *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 159, no. 5 (2014), pp. 42-50.