

# Facilitating the US Rebalance: Challenges and Prospects for Singapore as America's Security Partner

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This article assesses the extent to which Singapore has been willing to facilitate the rebalancing strategy of the United States, despite a number of challenges it has had to face as a consequence of its strategic choice. It argues that Singapore's backing for the rebalance is but the most recent demonstration of the city-state's longstanding support for America's forward presence. While this policy has engendered problems for Singapore, including incurring China's ire, these problems are unlikely to change Singapore's fundamental belief in the importance of America's strategic guarantee to the Asia-Pacific and Singapore's role in support of that.

Singapore has made a careful strategic choice to welcome and encourage the US rebalance (or pivot) to Asia.<sup>69</sup> If anything, since the end of the Cold War and considerably more than any Southeast Asian country has hitherto done, Singapore has proactively and progressively worked to facilitate and ensure the continuation of a robust US diplomatic and military presence in the region. Moreover, it has done so at its own expense vis-à-vis its ties with regional neighbours such as China, as well as the unwelcome attention its closeness with the United States has drawn from extremist non-state elements that harbour anti-US views. Although US-Singapore ties were enhanced in 2012 by way of a Strategic Partnership Dialogue established between the two countries, the upgrade arguably did not represent a major change in policy and/or strategic direction, but rather constituted a key development along a relatively continuous and stable growth trajectory dating back to the Cold War era. Such enhancements, in the words of a former US ambassador to Singapore, help make "a good working

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<sup>69</sup> This argument does not challenge the idea that Singapore practices hedging, if by that we mean the city-state's reliance on the United States for its security while engaging deeply with China for economic reasons. Kwik Cheng-Chwee, 'The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 30, no. 2 (August 2008), pp. 159-85. See Seng Tan, 'Faced with the Dragon: Perils and Prospects in Singapore's Relationship with China', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2012), pp. 245-65.

relationship even better”.<sup>70</sup> Needless to say, there have been bumps along the way, but nothing which the strength of their security partnership could not handle.

## No Rebalance Without Regional Partners

With the prospect of reduced US military involvement in the Middle East and Southwest Asia looming, in November 2011 US President Barack Obama formally declared his administration’s intention to rebalance America’s foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region. Against the mistaken view held by some that the rebalance constituted a “return” to Asia, architects of the strategy such as Kurt Campbell were quick to insist that whilst the United States never actually left, the rebalance, for all intents and purposes, represented “a vast and dynamic increase in US focus and depth of engagement in the region”.<sup>71</sup> And if the prospect of an imminent rise in US engagement was to be predicated upon a desire for a peaceful, stable and economically prosperous region—a vision America shares with other Asia-Pacific countries—then what the United States presumably expected from its regional partners was an active commitment on their part in building, supporting and sustaining the US rebalancing effort.

However, the intellectual debate over America’s rebalancing strategy has for the most part focused on whether the rebalance has been effective politically, militarily or economically, or, for that matter, whether the promised intensification in US engagement has been fully realised.<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, developments such as Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas (including land reclamation efforts in the latter) and the prospect of participation in the world’s largest trade pact, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), furnished justification and motivation for the United States to implement its rebalance strategy. On the other hand, there are a host of things that compete with the rebalance for US attention and resources, ranging from Russia’s annexation of Crimea and intervention in

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<sup>70</sup> Patricia L. Herbold, ‘Singapore—Strategic and Economic Partner: How the United States Benefits’, Remarks by the Ambassador, Washington Policy Center, 27 March 2007, <[singapore.usembassy.gov/sp\\_singapore\\_strategic\\_and\\_economic\\_partner.html](http://singapore.usembassy.gov/sp_singapore_strategic_and_economic_partner.html)> [Accessed 14 September 2016].

<sup>71</sup> Kurt Campbell and Brian Andrews, ‘Explaining the US ‘Pivot’ to Asia’, *Programme Paper, Americas* 2013/01 (London: Chatham House, August 2013), p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Michael Auslin, ‘Assessing the U.S. “Rebalance” to Asia: Trends and Prospects for American Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region’, Statement before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission On ‘China’s New Leadership and Implications for the United States’, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 7 February 2013, <[www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/-assessing-the-us-rebalance-to-asia\\_085943192571.pdf](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/-assessing-the-us-rebalance-to-asia_085943192571.pdf)> [Accessed 6 September 2016]; Robert Ross, Christopher Clarke and Michael Swaine, ‘A Critical Assessment of U.S. Rebalancing to Asia’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 December 2012, <[carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/13/critical-assessment-of-u.s.-rebalancing-to-asia-event-3903](http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/13/critical-assessment-of-u.s.-rebalancing-to-asia-event-3903)> [Accessed 6 September 2016]; and, David Shambaugh, ‘Assessing the US “Pivot” to Asia’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2013), pp. 10-19.

Ukraine, the emergence of ISIS (or ISIL) in the Middle East, to the effects of defence cuts on the ability of the US military to respond to strategic challenges.<sup>73</sup> On the domestic front, the two frontrunners in the US presidential election, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, have both questioned the benefits membership in the TPP—at least in its current incarnation, for Clinton—would supposedly yield for America; moreover, a Trump presidency could spell the end of the rebalance given Trump’s dismissive attitude towards America’s allies.<sup>74</sup>

Crucial as the predominantly US-centric terms of the foregoing debate are, their net effect, however, has been a relative lack of attention paid to the contributions of America’s regional partners in enabling, supporting and sustaining its rebalance. And when such attention has been accorded to America’s Southeast Asian partners, the emphasis has mostly been on efforts by the United States and other international actors to build and enhance the capacities of Southeast Asian countries so as to enable them to be more competent contributors to, and effective participants in, the region’s economic and security life.<sup>75</sup> Against that backdrop, this article looks at the US rebalance from the other side: the role played by Singapore in assisting America to implement the rebalance. Not unlike its Southeast Asian counterparts, Singapore has benefited from the renewed US attention to, and emphasis on, the region.<sup>76</sup>

## From Dependent to Partner

At the end of the Cold War, Singapore faced the alarming prospect of a US military withdrawal from Southeast Asia following the closure of US bases in the Philippines in 1991, as a consequence of the staunch nationalism of the Philippines Senate and the volcanic eruption at Mount Pinatubo which

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<sup>73</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships: An Independent Review of U.S. Defense Strategy in the Asia-Pacific* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2016), pp. vi-vii.

<sup>74</sup> Justin Sink, ‘Obama Backs Trade Deal Despite Clinton, Trump Opposition’, *Bloomberg*, 3 August 2016, <[www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-08-02/obama-says-he-won-t-abandon-trade-deal-opposed-by-clinton-trump](http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-08-02/obama-says-he-won-t-abandon-trade-deal-opposed-by-clinton-trump)> [Accessed 7 September 2016]; David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman, ‘Donald Trump Sets Conditions for Defending NATO Allies Against Attack’, *The New York Times*, 20 July 2016, <[www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/us/politics/donald-trump-issues.html)> [Accessed 7 September 2016].

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Lyle J. Morris, ‘Obama Doubles-down on Maritime Capacity Building in Southeast Asia’, *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, no. 333 (15 December 2015), <[www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb333\\_0.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35431](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb333_0.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=35431)> [Accessed 7 September 2016]; Prashanth Parameswaran, ‘US Boosting ASEAN Capacity Amid South China Sea Tensions’, *The Diplomat*, 10 October 2015, <[thediplomat.com/2015/10/us-boosting-asean-capacity-amid-south-china-sea-tensions/](http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/us-boosting-asean-capacity-amid-south-china-sea-tensions/)> [Accessed 7 September 2016]; and, Yigal Kerszenbaum, ‘Building Capacity in Southeast Asia—and Turning a Profit’, The Rockefeller Foundation, 14 April 2016, <[www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/building-capacity-in-southeast-asia-and-turning-a-profit/](http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/building-capacity-in-southeast-asia-and-turning-a-profit/)> [Accessed 7 September 2016].

<sup>76</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, ‘Advancing the US-Singapore Strategic Partnership’, *The Diplomat*, 30 July 2016, <[thediplomat.com/tag/singapore-us-rebalance/](http://thediplomat.com/tag/singapore-us-rebalance/)> [Accessed 12 September 2016].

damaged Clark Airbase. The Singaporean perspective of the United States differed markedly from that in the wake of the British withdrawal east of Suez (including Singapore) during the late 1960s.<sup>77</sup> At that point, Singapore's founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, memorably lamented the supplanting of the British presence by US policy in the light of what Lee saw as dubious American actions in Indochina, particularly in Laos, during the Indochina War.<sup>78</sup> However, Lee came to believe in the need for the United States—even as it withdrew from Vietnam—to maintain a naval presence in the region in order to balance against both the Soviet Union and China.<sup>79</sup> For that matter, it has been suggested that Singaporean leaders used Soviet support for Vietnam to portray the latter's occupation of Cambodia as an example of Soviet expansionism in order to draw the attention of the Americans.<sup>80</sup> And while US ambivalence vis-à-vis Southeast Asia allowed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to emerge as a regional actor in its own right, Singapore continued to urge successive US administrations against strategic neglect of the region. As Lee 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 US 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.<sup>81</sup>

In the view of Singapore, had the Americans abnegated responsibility to counterbalance against the Soviets during the Cold War—and arguably the Chinese in the post-Cold War period—the region would have turned out vastly different and considerably less hospitable than it is today. Much as Singapore's leaders rued America's failed effort in Vietnam, they conceded that the long-drawn campaign furnished ASEAN and its member states the

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<sup>77</sup> Toni Schönenberger, 'The British Withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia: Influence of the Labour Party on the Decision', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 3, no. 2 (September 1981), pp. 113-25.

<sup>78</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 26-27.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>80</sup> Shaun Narine, *Explaining ASEAN: Regionalism in Southeast Asia* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>81</sup> Lee Kuan Yew quoted in Amitav Acharya and See Seng Tan, 'Betwixt Balance and Community: America, ASEAN, and the Security of Southeast Asia', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2006), pp. 37-38.

time and opportunities they otherwise would not have had to develop both the regional organisation and their respective domestic economies.<sup>82</sup>

With the end of the Cold War and the forced closure of US bases in the Philippines, Singapore openly supported a strong US presence by signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in November 1990. This granted the Americans access to an airbase at Paya Lebar and port at Sembawang in the city-state. Singapore also welcomed the relocation, from the Philippines to Singapore, of a logistical unit that supports US Pacific Command (PACOM) activities in the Western Pacific theatre.<sup>83</sup> A subsequent addendum to the 1990 MOU granted the US Navy access to Singapore's then newly built Changi Naval Base, a facility large enough to dock aircraft carriers (even though Singapore does not own any). In a 1992 address in New York, Lee Kuan Yew justified Singapore's facilitation of the US military's forward presence and his country's proactive support for America's continued role as the region's "central player":

No alternative balance can be as comfortable as the present one with the US as a major player. But if the US economy cannot afford a US role, then a new balance it will have to be. However, the geopolitical balance without the US as a principal force will be very different from that which it now is or can be if the US remains a central player.<sup>84</sup>

Crucially, this policy stance of vigorous support and advocacy for America as the region's strategic guarantor did not change with Lee's transition to ostensibly more advisory positions in the Singapore Cabinet, first as 'Senior Minister' (1990-2004) and subsequently as 'Minister Mentor' (2004-11). As Bernard K. Gordon correctly predicted in the 1990/1991 issue of *Foreign Affairs* concerning Lee's voluntary relinquishment of the premiership, "Lee's departure from office will have no impact on US-Singapore relations".<sup>85</sup>

East Asia in the early to mid-1990s hosted the rapid emergence of a multilateral security architecture centring upon ASEAN. Together with fellow ASEAN countries and other stakeholders of that architecture, especially

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<sup>82</sup> As Goh Chok Tong, who succeeded Lee Kuan Yew as prime minister, acknowledged, "The US 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. ASEAN economies began to take off, spurred by US investments and a friendly American market". Cited in Emrys Chew, 'Southeast Asia: From Manifest Destiny to Shared Destiny', in Richmond M. Lloyd (ed.), *American Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives*, Ruger Papers no. 4 (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2009), p. 131.

<sup>83</sup> The unit is awkwardly named: Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific/Task Force 73, or COMLOG WESTPAC.

<sup>84</sup> In that same speech, Lee dismissed the prospect of India or Japan as replacement security providers and reasoned as follows, "So why not stick with what has worked so far? The US 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". Cited in Ang, *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought*, p. 73.

<sup>85</sup> Bernard K. Gordon, 'The Asian-Pacific Rim: Success at a Price', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 1 (1990/1991), p. 142.

Australia and Japan, Singapore worked to secure and strengthen America's political-strategic commitment to the region through ensuring the latter's regular participation in a series of multilateral dialogue and consultative mechanisms.<sup>86</sup> But Singapore's leaders clearly did not envision multilateralism as an alternative to, or replacement for, a stable regional balance of power. Treating the region's slew of multilateral dialogue processes as an adjunct to America's Asian alliances, they acknowledged the potential inherent in those processes to build mutual understanding and confidence, but did not promote them as a substitute for a US-led balance of power.<sup>87</sup> It is worth noting that US-Singapore ties in the 1990s were marred by developments such as Singapore's frank support for Asian values and its strong backing for China in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, for which the Chinese government was roundly condemned by the international community. It bears noting that Singapore registered grave concern over the crackdown by Beijing on the protests; for example, Lee Kuan Yew conceded that he and his entire ministerial team had been "shocked, horrified and saddened by this disastrous turn of events", mistaken in their belief that the Chinese government would have applied "the doctrine of minimum force to quell civil disorder".<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, although the Clinton administration's insistence that East Asian economies affected by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 had to adopt structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) became a sore point between the United States and a number of ASEAN countries, it did not adversely affect US-Singapore ties. This was because Singapore continued to embrace the so-called "Washington consensus" of globalisation and liberalisation.<sup>89</sup>

### **Building an "Indispensable" Partnership**

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Southeast Asians worried over their region being unfairly depicted as the "second front" in the war on terrorism.<sup>90</sup> With Singapore rumoured as the second iconic target of terror networks following New York—presumably because of its close ties with America and the inviting presence of US economic interests and military

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<sup>86</sup> See Seng Tan, *Multilateral Asian Security Architecture: Non-ASEAN Stakeholders* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 110-129.

<sup>87</sup> See Seng Tan, 'America the Indispensable Power: Singapore's Perspective of America as a Security Partner', *Asian Politics & Policy*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2016), p. 125.

<sup>88</sup> 'Statement by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on the events in Beijing', Prime Minister's Office, 5 June 1989, Release No. 12/JUN02-0/89/06/05, <[www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19890605.pdf](http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19890605.pdf)> [Accessed 15 September 2016].

<sup>89</sup> Chia Siow Yee, 'The Asian Financial Crisis: Singapore's Experience and Response', *ASEAN Economic Bulletin*, vol. 15, no. 3 (December 1998), pp. 297-308.

<sup>90</sup> John Gershman, 'Is Southeast Asia the Second Front?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81, no. 4 (2002), pp. 60-74.

personnel based in Singapore<sup>91</sup>—counter-terrorism cooperation grew between the two countries and added a new dimension to an already substantive bilateral partnership.<sup>92</sup> Singapore-based facilities such as the naval base at Changi were employed by US forces en route to Afghanistan, and were used in various counter-terrorism operations.<sup>93</sup> It was presumably on the basis of this growing partnership that President George W. Bush invited Singapore in 2003 to become a major non-NATO ally, which the latter declined owing to the political sensitivities with neighbouring countries such a decision would likely have engendered.<sup>94</sup> That same year, Singapore joined the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (for interdicting the transport of nuclear materials) and was the first country in Asia to join the Container Security Initiative (for US pre-inspection of shipments bound for America) and the US Department of Energy's Megaports Initiative (for the enhancement of detection capabilities for special nuclear and other radioactive materials in seaborne cargo). In 2004, the bilateral free trade pact signed by the two countries the year before entered into force; by 2007, US exports to Singapore reportedly grew to almost half of America's total exports to China.<sup>95</sup>

In 2005, the two countries upgraded their security partnership through the establishment of the US-Singapore Strategic Framework Agreement—which identified Singapore as a “major security cooperation partner of the United States”—that covered, inter alia, joint exercises, cooperation on UN peacekeeping operations and access to US defence technology. Between 2003 and 2008, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) deployed a total of five Landing Ship Tanks (LST), five KC-135R tanker aircraft, and one C-130 transport aircraft to Iraq as part of Operation Blue Orchid.<sup>96</sup> Between 2007 and 2013, the SAF contributed nearly five hundred troops to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The responsibilities undertaken by the Singaporean troops included providing construction and medical services, conducting weapons locating via radar and imagery analysis, operating unmanned aerial vehicles, and training the Afghan

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<sup>91</sup> Frank Lavin, ‘Enemies at the Gates: Security Lessons from a Foiled Embassy Attack’, *Foreign Affairs*, 29 November 2012, <[www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138457/frank-lavin/enemies-at-the-gates](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138457/frank-lavin/enemies-at-the-gates)> [Accessed 14 September 2016].

<sup>92</sup> Damien Cheong and Kumar Ramakrishna, ‘Singapore-US Cooperation on Counterterrorism and National Security’, *RSIS Commentaries*, no. 134/2013, 18 July 2013, <[www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CO13134.pdf](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CO13134.pdf)> [Accessed 14 September 2016].

<sup>93</sup> As US Ambassador Patricia Herbold noted in 2007, “We also greatly appreciate all of the diplomatic and material support Singapore has provided for Iraq”. Herbold, ‘Singapore—Strategic and Economic Partner’.

<sup>94</sup> See Seng Tan, ‘The United States: Still Singapore’s Indispensable Partner?’, *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 295, 10 December 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Herbold, ‘Singapore—Strategic and Economic Partner’.

<sup>96</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Partnering to Rebuild: Operation Blue Orchid: The Singapore Armed Forces Experience in Iraq* (Singapore: MINDEF Public Affairs, 2010).

security forces.<sup>97</sup> The level of familiarity, interoperability and access afforded by the closeness of the US-Singapore security relationship was most evident during joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunamis in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005. As Congressman Joe Wilson acknowledged in a speech at the US House of Representatives on 21 September 2005, “After playing a critical role in the tsunami relief efforts earlier this year, the Republic of Singapore was one of the first countries that understood the devastation in our nation and immediately reached out to help those left in Katrina’s wake”.<sup>98</sup>

In tangible terms, what Singapore has accomplished since President Obama’s enunciation of the rebalance would suggest an increased determination by the city-state to actively support America’s strategy towards the Asia-Pacific. In February 2012, Singapore and Washington jointly established the US-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue (SPD), an annual arrangement which a former US ambassador to Singapore has described as a “move up a weight class” for the bilateral relationship.<sup>99</sup> Within the terms of the US-Singapore Third Country Training Program, both countries agreed to jointly establish technical assistance training programs for developing countries including in the lower Mekong sub-region to help build capacity, narrow the development gap, and deepen regional integration.<sup>100</sup> The agendas of subsequent SPDs have included issues such as the TPP, the relevance of the region’s evolving multilateral architecture to regional stability and the management of growing challenges (such as the environment and climate change, cyber-security and water management), the importance for all countries in the region to resolve their disputes by peaceful means in accordance with international law (including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea), and the need to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities in the South China Sea.<sup>101</sup> The SPD process can

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<sup>97</sup> Ministry of Defence, *Two Thousand, Two Hundred and Sixty-Three Days 2007–2013: Operation Blue Ridge: The SAF’s Six-Year Mission in Afghanistan* (Singapore: Ministry of Defence, 2013).

<sup>98</sup> Cited in Gail Wan, ‘RSAF Provides Assistance in Katrina’s Wake’, *Cyber Pioneer*, 5 October 2005 (last updated 1 October 2012), <[www.mindef.gov.sg/im indef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/features/2005/oct05\\_fs.print.noimg.html](http://www.mindef.gov.sg/im indef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/features/2005/oct05_fs.print.noimg.html)> [Accessed 15 September 2016].

<sup>99</sup> David Adelman, ‘The US-Singapore Strategic Partnership: Bilateral Relations Move up a Weight Class’, *The Ambassadors Review*, Spring 2012, <[www.americanambassadors.org/publications/ambassadors-review/spring-2012/the-us-singapore-strategic-partnership-bilateral-relations-move-up-a-weight-class](http://www.americanambassadors.org/publications/ambassadors-review/spring-2012/the-us-singapore-strategic-partnership-bilateral-relations-move-up-a-weight-class)> [Accessed 7 September 2016].

<sup>100</sup> ‘Joint Statement of the United States-Singapore Strategic Partners Dialogue’, Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 January 2012, <[www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/phnom\\_penh/press\\_statements\\_speeches/embassy\\_news\\_press\\_releases/2012/201201/press\\_201201\\_3.html](http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/phnom_penh/press_statements_speeches/embassy_news_press_releases/2012/201201/press_201201_3.html)> [Accessed 15 September 2016].

<sup>101</sup> See, ‘Joint Statement of 2nd United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue’, Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 24 January 2014, <[www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media\\_centre/press\\_room/pr/2014/201401/press\\_20140127.html](http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media_centre/press_room/pr/2014/201401/press_20140127.html)> [Accessed 15 September 2016]; and ‘Joint Statement on the Third United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue’, Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 February 2015, <[www.mfa.gov.sg/content/](http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/)>

therefore be viewed as the comprehensive institutionalisation of bilateral cooperation in areas hitherto not formally covered by the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement.

Another key mutual concern discussed at the annual SPD meetings was the dire need to address the challenges posed by violent extremism and foreign terrorist fighters, as evidenced by the emergence of ISIS in the Middle East. These trends have significant implications for the Southeast Asian region, whether through the importation of violence to Southeast Asia by fighters returning to their home countries or the emulation of ISIS-style violence by home-grown extremists.<sup>102</sup> In 2014, Singapore announced its decision to join thirty-three other nations in Operation Inherent Resolve, a multinational coalition to combat ISIS, and was the first Southeast Asian country to join the US-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. In 2016, the Singaporean prime minister announced the addition of a “modest contribution”—a medical support team supported by soldiers from the SAF’s Army Deployment Force (ADF)—to Singapore’s existing contributions to the anti-ISIS effort (i.e. air-to-air refuelling and imagery analysis).<sup>103</sup>

Rotational deployments of US military assets to Singapore have also been taking place. In June 2012, following a bilateral meeting on the margins of the annual Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) defence forum in Singapore, the defence ministers of the two countries announced that Singapore had agreed to allow the US Navy to deploy four new warships—the Littoral Combat Ships (LCSs)—to Singapore, but stressed the vessels would not be permanently based there and their crews would live aboard during ship visits.<sup>104</sup> (For that matter, Singapore’s commitment to host the SLD, initiated back in 2002 by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, equally reflects the Singapore government’s facilitation, among other things, of the US rebalance through providing a regular platform for the US Secretary of Defense to visit and engage the region. Indeed, it was at the 2012 SLD where then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta took the

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mfa/media\_centre/press\_room/pr/2015/201502/press\_20150214.html> [Accessed 15 September 2016].

<sup>102</sup> Jeremy Au Yong, ‘Singapore, US Pledge to Boost Cooperation in Anti-Terror Fight’, *The Straits Times*, 15 February 2016, <[www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/singapore-us-pledge-to-boost-cooperation-in-anti-terror-fight](http://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/singapore-us-pledge-to-boost-cooperation-in-anti-terror-fight)> [Accessed 15 September 2016]; Joseph Chinyong Liow, ‘ISIS Goes to Asia: Extremism in the Middle East Isn’t Only Spreading West’, *Foreign Affairs*, 19 September 2014, <[www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142004/joseph-chinyong-liow/isis-goes-to-asia](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142004/joseph-chinyong-liow/isis-goes-to-asia)> [Accessed 15 September 2016].

<sup>103</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, ‘Singapore to Deepen Role in Islamic State Fight’, *The Diplomat*, 3 August 2016, <[thediplomat.com/2016/08/singapore-to-deepen-role-in-islamic-state-fight/](http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/singapore-to-deepen-role-in-islamic-state-fight/)> [Accessed 15 September 2016].

<sup>104</sup> ‘Singapore Agrees To Host Four New US Warships’, *Radio Australia*, 3 June 2012, <[www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/2012-06-03/singapore-agrees-to-host-four-new-us-warships/954312](http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/international/2012-06-03/singapore-agrees-to-host-four-new-us-warships/954312)> [Accessed 7 September 2016].

opportunity to advance the justification for the rebalancing strategy).<sup>105</sup> The inaugural SPD reviewed the comprehensive array of areas spanning security, defence, education, trade and environment in extant cooperative arrangements between Singapore and the United States. In July 2016, Singapore welcomed the arrival of two P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft from the US Seventh Fleet, whose purported *raison d'être* for deployment was to participate in exercises relating to search-and-rescue, anti-piracy and HADR. According to a Singaporean defence analyst, the surveillance plane deployments reflected Singapore's desire for the United States to remain engaged in regional security and its regard for America as its primary security partner. What Singapore is doing, that analyst continued, "is practically facilitating the US (in its) rebalancing to Asia".<sup>106</sup> These developments underscore, from the American perspective, the important role played by Singapore in support of the US rebalance.

## Challenges and Drawbacks

Despite the strong partnership forged between them, the two countries have nonetheless encountered problems in their bilateral ties. Needless to say, the US and Singapore governments have not always seen eye to eye. For instance, Singapore has long taken umbrage at US criticisms of Singapore's perceived lapses in democracy and human rights,<sup>107</sup> as well as the latter's purported failure to address human trafficking within its own borders.<sup>108</sup> In 1988, a US diplomat was expelled from Singapore for allegedly having

<sup>105</sup> 'Remarks by Secretary Panetta at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore', US Department of Defense, 2 June 2012, <[archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5049](http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5049)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>106</sup> Collin Koh of the Singapore-based S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) cited in Jeremy Koh, 'US Surveillance Planes Deployed Here till Next Month for Exercises', *The Straits Times*, 30 July 2016, <[www.straitstimes.com/singapore/us-surveillance-planes-deployed-here-till-next-month-for-exercises](http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/us-surveillance-planes-deployed-here-till-next-month-for-exercises)> [Accessed 15 September 2016].

<sup>107</sup> For example, the US State Department's 2014 report on Singapore's human rights record noted the following: "The government has broad powers to limit citizens' rights. The government could and did censor the media (from television shows to websites) if it determined that the content would undermine social harmony or criticized the government. The Internal Security Act (ISA) permits preventive detention without warrant, filing of charges, or normal judicial review; in recent years, the government has used it against alleged terrorists and not against persons in the political opposition". The report went on to cite the following "additional human rights problems": "Caning is an allowable punishment for some crimes; restrictions existed on free speech and assembly; government intimidation led to self-censorship by journalists; there were some limited restrictions of freedom of religion and some restrictions on labor rights". See, US Department of State, *Singapore 2014 Human Rights Report*, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014 (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2014), p. 1 <[www.state.gov/documents/organization/236686.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236686.pdf)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>108</sup> In 2015, Singapore retained, for the fifth year in a row, its Tier 2 position—i.e., has not fully complied with US laws on human trafficking but is making "significant efforts" to do so—in the US Department of State's 2015 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, which drew a sharp riposte from the Singapore side. Aw Cheng Wei, 'US Annual Trafficking Report Not an Accurate Representation: Singapore', *The Straits Times*, 29 July 2015, <[www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/us-annual-trafficking-report-not-an-accurate-representation-singapore](http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/us-annual-trafficking-report-not-an-accurate-representation-singapore)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

“meddled” in local politics through cultivating disgruntled Singaporeans as potential opposition candidates.<sup>109</sup> Singapore leaders and policymakers have been critical of America’s social order and Western individualism more generally. As Lee Kuan Yew once bemoaned, “The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he or she pleases has come at the expense of orderly society.”<sup>110</sup> For Lee and likeminded Singaporean public intellectuals, American-style individualism stands at odds with the dire need for communal solidarity which a society as multi-ethnic and multi-religious as Singapore’s requires in order to preserve the national peace. The enduring question of Palestinian suffrage, a sticking point for many in Southeast Asia’s Muslim constituencies (including Singapore’s)—and an ostensible driver of Islamic militancy via vicarious identification—has also led to quiet dissatisfaction over Washington’s pro-Israel stance.<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, given the extent and depth of their security cooperation, snags and squabbles have inevitably occurred in US-Singapore ties. For example, the relative congruence and coordination in counter-terrorism and security policy between the two countries did not stop the Americans from censuring the Singaporeans for allegedly not having done enough. A 2013 report published by the US State Department criticised Singapore’s bilateral and multilateral engagement on counter-terrorism intelligence and law enforcement cooperation as “inconsistent and marked by a transactional mind-set that impeded the development of broad, deep, and predictable agency-to-agency relationships”. Whilst acknowledging that bilateral counter-terror collaboration has proven successful from time to time, the report however concluded that “Singapore appeared to provide selective cooperation dependent upon the issue”.<sup>112</sup> In response, the Singapore government said it was “surprised and disappointed” by the US comments, “particularly so given the close relationship and cooperation between [their] countries and agencies in the area of counterterrorism”. The Singaporeans argued that the US report not only furnished an inaccurate depiction of the

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<sup>109</sup> Edwin Lee, *Singapore: The Unexpected Nation* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), p. 470.

<sup>110</sup> Lee Kuan Yew: *The Grandmaster’s Insights on China, the United States, and the World*, Interviews and Selections by Graham Allison and Robert D. Blackwill (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), p. 28.

<sup>111</sup> As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong told a Washington Beltway audience in 2007, “American policies in the Middle East also impact Southeast Asia. The Israel-Palestine conflict stirs up strong passions in Muslim communities worldwide, including in Southeast Asia. If the United States can bring about progress on this problem, it will address perceptions of American unilateralism and one-sidedness, help America to build trust and credibility, and make it easier for countries with large Muslim populations to deepen relations with America”. See, ‘Speech by Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore, at the Asia Society Washington Center / US-ASEAN Business Council Joint Gala Dinner, May 3 2007, in Washington, DC’, Embassy of the Republic of Singapore, 3 May 2007, <[www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/washington/newsroom/press\\_statements/2007/200705/press\\_200705\\_01.html](http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/washington/newsroom/press_statements/2007/200705/press_200705_01.html)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>112</sup> US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 2013), p. 53.

relations that Singaporean security services have with their US counterparts, but that it fundamentally misunderstood Singapore's "deep commitment" towards international cooperation.<sup>113</sup>

Beyond the context of the bilateral relationship, Singapore's support for the rebalance has created other difficulties for itself. In particular, Singapore has found its usually strong relations with China complicated by what Beijing perceives charily as Singapore's propensity to pick the United States over China where the South China Sea disputes are concerned.<sup>114</sup> This has especially been the case since 2010, with the rise in Chinese assertiveness presumably in response to perceived US interference in the South China Sea disputes. For example, in the wake of comments by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in early August 2016 regarding the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling against Chinese claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea, the Chinese foreign ministry issued this rejoinder: "China hopes that Singapore can maintain an objective and fair position as the coordinator of China and ASEAN dialogue relations, so as to advance Sino-Singapore relations and healthy and stable China-ASEAN ties".<sup>115</sup> Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin went a step further with a veiled warning: "As Singapore is not a claimant in the South China Sea, we hope that the Singapore Government, on the condition of not interfering in South China Sea issues, will actively promote cooperation between China and ASEAN".<sup>116</sup>

Notwithstanding their desire and support for maritime access, the careful way in which Singapore leaders have approached American statements and actions regarding US freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea reveals their concern not to rile the Chinese unnecessarily. Allowing that the United States has a right to protect its interests, Singapore Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen nonetheless urged in late 2015 that "incidents' [at sea] would not be good for the region".<sup>117</sup> The Singaporeans

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<sup>113</sup> 'Singapore "Surprised and Disappointed" by US Comments on Counter-Terrorism Cooperation', *Today*, 17 July 2013, <[www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-surprised-and-disappointed-us-comments-counter-terrorism-cooperation?singlepage=true](http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/singapore-surprised-and-disappointed-us-comments-counter-terrorism-cooperation?singlepage=true)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>114</sup> Cheng Bifan, 'Singapore Has Picked the Wrong Target in Its Balance of Powers Strategy: *Global Times* Commentary', *The Straits Times*, 9 June 2016, <[www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/singapore-has-picked-the-wrong-target-in-its-balance-of-powers-strategy-global-times](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/singapore-has-picked-the-wrong-target-in-its-balance-of-powers-strategy-global-times)> [Accessed 12 September 2016].

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Cheong Koh Ping, 'China Asks Singapore To 'Respect' Its Position on South China Sea Ruling', *The Straits Times*, 6 August 2016, <[www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-asks-singapore-to-respect-its-position-on-south-china-sea-ruling-and-asean](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-asks-singapore-to-respect-its-position-on-south-china-sea-ruling-and-asean)> [Accessed 12 September 2016].

<sup>116</sup> Cited in 'Chinese Social Users Lash Out at Singapore Over S. China Sea Dispute', *Today*, 23 August 2016, <<http://www.todayonline.com/chinaindia/china/chinese-social-media-users-lash-out-singapore-over-s-china-sea-dispute>> [Accessed 12 September 2016].

<sup>117</sup> Chong Ja Ian, 'South China Sea Series—Freedom of Navigation Operations: Better Quiet Resolve', *RSIS Commentaries*, no. CO15236, 6 November 2015, <[www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-)

also worry over the proclivity of some US Congressional members, and occasionally the White House as well, to pressure China in ways that could perceptibly upset the status quo. To that end, they have spoken up on behalf of the Chinese as and when they felt it warranted. One example is the visit of Singapore Foreign Minister, Kasiviswanathan Shanmugum, to Washington in early 2012, when Singapore felt that US officials had engaged in gratuitous anti-China rhetoric.<sup>118</sup> Once, when asked what risks might a contentious Sino-US relationship pose to trade-dependent Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong noted that much of what happens to Singapore depends on the state of relations between the two major powers, because if that were to sour, “a lot of things [could] go wrong” for Singapore and the region.<sup>119</sup>

More fundamentally, Singapore’s facilitation of the US rebalance has been taken by the Chinese, fairly or otherwise, to connote the city-state’s support for the US-led “containment” of China’s rise. According to one view, Singapore, in the eyes of the Chinese, is not unlike a deceptive “overseas relative” because even though China willingly granted business priorities to Singapore, it has been disappointed with Singapore’s “military alliance” with the United States, “which may contain ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’”.<sup>120</sup> This suspicion over Singapore’s ostensible duplicity is equally characteristic of aspects of the Chinese media. For example, Lee Kuan Yew once complained about the unfortunate predilection of the conservative Chinese press to translate the phrase “to balance” (*pingheng*) as “to conscribe” (*zhiheng*), hence denoting containment.<sup>121</sup> Such mistakes have aroused Chinese anger unnecessarily. Yet this challenge and the difficulties discussed above have neither diluted nor dissuaded the belief and commitment which Singapore has invested in and to the US rebalance.

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publication/rsis/co15236-south-china-sea-series-freedom-of-navigation-operations-better-quiet-resolve/#.V9umG03\_qM8> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>118</sup> Zhou Hao, ‘DC Rhetoric Draws Singapore Ire’, *Global Times*, 10 February 2012, <[www.globaltimes.cn/content/695357.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/695357.shtml)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>119</sup> David Schlesinger, ‘Singapore Needs US and China To Solve Issues’, *Reuters*, 2 November 2010, <[news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20101102-245393.html](http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20101102-245393.html)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].

<sup>120</sup> The author of this perspective concluded by asking “whether Singapore without Lee Kuan Yew can continue to enjoy its enviable role as an honest broker by declining to choose sides” in the face of growing China-US competition and tensions in Southeast Asia. Sun Xi, ‘China and Singapore are Distant Relatives at Best’, *The Globalist*, 20 December 2015, <[www.theglobalist.com/china-and-singapore-are-distant-relatives-at-best/](http://www.theglobalist.com/china-and-singapore-are-distant-relatives-at-best/)> (Accessed 13 October 2016).

<sup>121</sup> ‘On Power and Stabilising Forces’, *The Straits Times*, 17 May 2010, cited in See Seng Tan and Oleg Korovin, ‘Seeking Stability in Turbulent Times: Southeast Asia’s New Normal?’, in Daljit Singh (ed.), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2015* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), p. 10.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the extent to which Singapore has been willing to facilitate the rebalancing strategy of the United States, despite a number of challenges it has had to face as a consequence of its strategic choice. In return, the Obama administration has acknowledged the Singaporean effort on multiple occasions. When Prime Minister Lee visited Washington in August 2016, President Obama feted him with a state dinner and referred to Singapore as “an anchor of [the American] presence in the region” and to their bilateral relationship as a “solid-rock partnership”, whilst during his visit to Singapore in June 2016, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter insisted that America has “no better friend than Singapore” in the region.<sup>122</sup> However, as this article has argued, Singapore’s backing for the rebalance is but the most recent demonstration of support for America’s forward presence and belief in the importance of America’s strategic guarantee to the Asia-Pacific region. Overcoming its initial reservations over US policy during the Indochina war, Singapore has grown from being a tacit security dependent of the United States, to becoming America’s fully fledged, even indispensable, security partner. To be sure, just how enduring this partnership will prove in the foreseeable future depends in part on the outcome of the upcoming US presidential election. Even then, it is probably unlikely in the event of a Trump victory that a Trump administration would wish to reverse the course taken by the US–Singapore security partnership and undo the progress it has hitherto achieved.

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<sup>122</sup> ‘As it happens: President Obama hosts PM Lee at the White House’, *Channel News Asia*, 2 August 2016, <[www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/as-it-happens-president/3004710.html](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/as-it-happens-president/3004710.html)> [Accessed 12 September 2016]; Jermyn Chow, ‘US has “no better friend than Singapore” in the region, says Defence Secretary Carter’, *The Straits Times*, 3 June 2016 <[www.straitstimes.com/singapore/us-has-no-better-friend-than-singapore-in-the-region-defence-secretary-carter](http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/us-has-no-better-friend-than-singapore-in-the-region-defence-secretary-carter)> [Accessed 16 September 2016].