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Singapore's Balancing Diplomacy: Defence Cooperation With USA, India

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Singapore took two big steps last month to strengthen its strategic partnerships with two big powers – one the global superpower United States of America; the other a regional Asian power India. These were taken in pursuance of Singapore's longstanding policy of having a balance of power that would help ensure peace and stability in the region. While the US has long been part of the strategic equation the move to engage India is a recent development. Both however have a common motivation, ie to balance other emerging regional powers such as China and Japan.

In the first case Singapore took the opportunity of the visit of President George W Bush, after the Bangkok Summit of APEC Leaders, to announce a commitment to enter into a Framework Agreement for the Promotion of a Strategic Partnership in Defence and Security. This strategic agreement would expand the current bilateral cooperation in areas such as counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, joint military exercises and training, policy dialogues and defence technology.

The second move was the first-ever visit to India by a Singapore Defence Minister during which he and his Indian counterpart signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement that would provide for more personnel exchanges, visits and training courses, intelligence exchanges and defence policy dialogue. The agreement would bring bilateral relations to a higher plane and open up opportunities for further interaction between the armed forces of the two countries.

At first sight the two events may not seem remarkable. Both defence cooperation agreements formalised ongoing arrangements for military exchanges and training exercises. However they are noteworthy for the strategic considerations behind them. Both were prompted by their shared concern over the emergence of new threats to global peace and regional stability such as terrorism, that required closer cooperation among countries in difference regions. For the US the agreement with Singapore would confirm the important role played by Singapore as a major security cooperation partner providing logistics support for US naval and air forces since the signing of the 1990 MOU; while for Singapore the agreement acknowledged the need for a strong US military presence in Asia that was vital for the peace and stability of the region. For India the agreement with Singapore provided an opportunity to build a bridge for its strategic engagement with ASEAN; while for Singapore it opened the possibility of getting new training spaces on land and sea of India for its armed forces.

Assymetric Relations

Though they are assymetrical the two agreements reflect Singapore's active defence diplomacy, underpinned by the nexus between security and economics. The two defence cooperation agreements come in the wake of economic agreements that Singapore has concluded or negotiated with the two powers; first the landmark Free Trade Area Agreement with the US signed earlier this year, and second, the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement with India that is being negotiated. Both underscore the strong political and economic relations that have developed between Singapore and the two countries in the past decade.

True there is no comparison between the two relationships – Singapore-US trade amounted to \$44 billion and US investments in Singapore totalled \$27 billion, with Singapore investments in the US amounting to \$6.6 billion, while Singapore-India trade totalled \$7.5 billion and Singapore is India's eighth largest inward investor. However there is potential for synergies as India opens up its economy and invites foreign investments in its defence industries in addition to infocomms technology. While Singapore is a major purchaser of US aircraft and weaponry and is involved in R&D joint ventures with US corporations it has begun to purchase some military equipment from India as well. For Singapore the two defence cooperation agreements represent the fruition of its policy of pursuing friendship and cooperation with likeminded countries to protect and promote their common interests.

Shared perspectives

In this regard Singapore and the US share a common strategic perspective of security and economic interests in the region. In brief remarks after his talks with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, President Bush said much of their discussion was about how to continue to foster their agenda of peace and freedom as well as prosperity through trade. Reviewing recent developments in Southeast Asia and regional efforts in the war against terrorism they noted that much headway had been made in disrupting terrorist networks but more needed to be done as the campaign against terrorism required a sustained long term effort. Acknowledging the need for regional and international cooperation in this regard the two leaders pledged to continue to work closely both bilaterally and through multilateral institutions such as ASEAN, APEC and the UN to defeat terrorism. The burgeoning US-Singapore ties, which did not amount to making Singapore a non-NATO ally like Thailand, served to entrench the US interest and presence in the region.

Likewise Singapore's Defence Minister told an Indian audience that bilateral cooperation in the various sectors took place against a backdrop of stronger political relations between Singapore and India. At a time when security challenges facing them have become more complex and they faced similar threats, cooperation in the defence sector between Singapore and India could be mutually beneficial. Pointing out that the security challenges spanned the whole spectrum from conventional threats to the danger of terrorist attacks, international cooperation to handle these security challenges were critically important. It is clear that the Singapore-India defence and security partnership would be an important component of this cooperation.

This partnership is based on a mutual perception of each other's importance to the other. Singapore saw an important role for India to contribute to peace and stability in the region as India was of considerable strategic weight and geographically contiguous to Southeast Asia, which in turn was the bridge that linked the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. India acknowledged Singapore's role in bringing India and ASEAN closer. The signing in Bali of an ASEAN-India Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation that would pave the way for a FTA in 10 years, as well as India's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation of ASEAN, confirmed the value of this role to the region.

In their respective ways the two defence cooperation agreements, between Singapore and the US and between Singapore and India, highlight the dynamism and innovation of Singapore's defence diplomacy in pursuing its policy of balanced and constructive engagement with all major powers in the region. It is a policy that has enabled Singapore to respond swiftly to the rapidly changing global configuration.

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