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Singapore-US Cooperation on Counterterrorism and National Security

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Synopsis

The recent negative assessment of Singapore's level of cooperation with the US on counterterrorism implicitly denigrates past and on-going joint counterterrorism efforts. Nevertheless, joint cooperation on broader national security issues will still continue in the future.

Commentary

THE US Department of State (DoS) recently released its Country Reports on Terrorism 2012. While generally favourable in its assessment of Singapore, the report does take issue with the level of contribution from Singapore security agencies in the areas of intelligence and law enforcement cooperation.

The report alleges that "Singapore's bilateral and multilateral engagement on counterterrorism intelligence and law enforcement cooperation was inconsistent and marked by a transactional mindset that impeded the development of broad, deep, and predictable agency-to-agency relationships." It went on to suggest that "while some agencies...had success from time to time, Singapore appeared to provide selective cooperation [that was] dependent upon the issue." The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a joint statement on 17 July 2013 refuting this assessment.

More than a decade of cooperation in CT

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a joint statement on 17 July 2013 refuting this assessment. The ministries expressed disappointment that the "State Department [had] cast a negative light on Singapore's bilateral and multilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism." They were also concerned that the report did not "accurately describe" Singapore's relationship with the various US security agencies especially those involved in counter-terrorism. The report, the ministries added, also demonstrated "a lack of understanding of Singapore's deep commitment towards international cooperation against the threat of terrorism, whether at the bilateral or multilateral level, and not least on the intelligence and law enforcement front."

The DoS report implicitly denigrates past and on-going joint counterterrorism efforts. Singapore has actively cooperated with the US in counterterrorism (CT) efforts as well as broader security matters for over a decade. When the War on Terrorism was initiated by the Bush administration in 2001, Singapore was one of the first countries to join the campaign.

Operational and actionable intelligence was shared between the various security agencies of both countries, which assisted in the uncovering of the local Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cell, and subsequent arrests of the JI's Singaporean operatives. The arrests disrupted and indeed foiled plans by the JI to attacks US targets based in Singapore. Singapore also signed the Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defence and Security with the US in 2005 in order to boost security cooperation with the US on all fronts.

Under the Obama administration, both countries have continued to work toward enhancing security cooperation across the board. A 2009 Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report acknowledges such cooperation: "Since 9/11, Singapore has increased intelligence cooperation with regional countries and the United States. Singaporean authorities have shared information gathered from suspected militants held under the Internal Security Act with U.S. officials, reportedly providing detailed insights into JI and Al Qaeda's structure, methods, and recruiting strategies. Singapore was a founding member of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a programme that aims to interdict shipments of weapons of mass destruction-related materials, and was the first Asian country to join the Container Security Initiative (CSI), a series of bilateral, reciprocal agreements that allow U.S. Customs and Border Patrol officials to pre-screen U.S.-bound containers. Singapore has led other littoral states in Southeast Asia to jointly protect the critical shipping lanes of the Straits of Malacca from piracy or terrorist attacks."

The right to be selective with intelligence

As a sovereign country, Singapore has every right to exercise discretion on the kind of information/intelligence that is shared with its allies. National interests should of course be considered when such intelligence-sharing takes place.

No country would wittingly share information/intelligence that would ultimately jeopardise its own interests and security. Furthermore, not unreasonably, every country operates with some constraints when it comes to intelligence-sharing.

The US CT authorities themselves limited the access of Indonesian CT officials to JI operational leader and Indonesian national Hambali, following his capture in Thailand a decade ago, for national security reasons. Given that Hambali was linked to both JI and Al Qaeda, the US reserved the right not to extradite him back to Indonesia although Jakarta had strong reasons to find out what he knew about Indonesian terrorist plots. This seems to be "selective cooperation" on CT matters as well.

While transnational terrorism is still high on the list of contemporary security threats, there seems to be a shift in focus. This is observable from the 2013 global threat assessment report by the US intelligence community that regards cyber threats as more important than terrorism, transnational organised crime, weapons of mass destruction proliferation, counterintelligence, counterspace, natural resources insecurity and competition, health and pandemic threats and mass atrocities.

Beyond cooperation in counterterrorism

This apparent shift suggests that cooperation between the US and Singapore security agencies will be needed in other areas of national security, and not just in the counterterrorism domain. There are already many partnerships between US and Singapore agencies in this regard.

Another security domain on which Singapore will be working closely with the US is diplomacy, and in particular, the US' rebalancing efforts in Asia. At the meeting between US President Barack Obama and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in April 2013, PM Lee reaffirmed Singapore's assistance to the US to help it "engage the region constructively, productively and in a way which fosters stability and prosperity for all countries." As part of this commitment, Singapore has allowed the US to deploy up to four Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) to the city-state to use its facilities.

It would be safe to assume therefore that Singapore will continue to be an active partner of the US in all matters related to security, and make meaningful contributions as expected. Despite the close ties between the US and Singapore, disagreements between partners is unavoidable. This is nothing unusual. Every junior diplomat knows Lord Palmerston's dictum that states have no permanent friends, merely permanent interests.

This does not mean close strategic partnerships based on enlightened mutual interest are not possible. This is precisely why the late President Reagan summed up his realistic attitude toward thawing relations and gradually improving relations with Gorbachev's USSR as: "Trust - but verify".

Although the recent criticisms are unpalatable and indeed debatable, we should focus on the commonalities

and future opportunities for collaboration between both countries. The strategic challenges of the future demand this.

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