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Enhancing Australia-Singapore Defence Relations: A View from Australia

By Benjamin Schreer

Synopsis

2015 will provide Singapore and Australia with good opportunities to further enhance their defence relationship towards the goal of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'.

Commentary

AT THE Eighth Meeting of the Singapore-Australia Joint Ministerial Committee (SAJMC) in Singapore in August 2014, both sides agreed to further strengthen defence cooperation as part of a new roadmap known as Project 2025 towards a comprehensive strategic partnership'.

In 2015, the prime ministers of the two countries are scheduled to sign a bilateral joint declaration to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Singapore and Australia. As well, the Australian government will release a new Defence White Paper (DWP), providing additional opportunities for enhancing bilateral defence ties.

Why strong defence ties with Singapore

Stability in Southeast Asia traditionally has been a core Australian strategic interest. As the region has become more competitive, particularly in regards to unresolved maritime disputes in the South China Sea, successive Australian governments have identified the need to building closer defence ties with a number of key Southeast Asian nations as a means to building trust, preventing conflict and maintaining a rules-based maritime order.

In this context, Singapore is becoming even more important as a security partner for Australia. In many ways, the bilateral defence ties are already Australia's most advanced and substantial in Southeast Asia. For instance, while the Australian Defence Force's (ADF) engagement activities with other regional nations focus mainly on capacity building of these countries' security forces, the very high professional and technological standard of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) elevates the defence relationship to a category of its own.

Moreover, both sides have a mutual interest in maintaining the rules-based, regional maritime order and in strengthening regional capacity in regards to maritime security and Humanitarian and Disaster

Relief (HADR). Accordingly, the ADF has deployed a permanent International Liaison Officer at Singapore's Information Fusion Centre.

As well, activities within the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA), also comprising the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Malaysia, have gradually been expanded into the maritime domain.

Next steps

Arguably, the key to success in the Singapore-Australia defence relationship thus far has been its pragmatic focus on enhancing military-technological cooperation. Accordingly, the 2014 SAJMC Joint Communiqué identified a number of areas to strengthen practical defence cooperation.

Among them is the renewal of the Memoranda of Agreement between the two countries on the SAF use of the Shoalwater Bay Training Area and arrangements regarding the SAF's flying training school at the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Base Pearce. It can be expected that an agreement on extended access for the SAF will be reached.

Another area is to expand training and exercise activities. The ADF's emerging amphibious capability, centred around two new 27,000 tonnes Canberra-class amphibious vessels, will provide new opportunities in this regard. Moreover, if Singapore, as is widely expected, decides to acquire the fifth-generation Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), joint training and exercises with the RAAF should be a logical step. After all, apart from Japan and South Korea, Singapore and Australia will be the only Asia-Pacific countries operating this sophisticated system.

Indeed, given that the US just selected Australia as one of the two regional hubs - besides Japan - for heavy maintenance of the JSF, it would make sense for Singapore and Australia to enter into preliminary discussions on a possible arrangement for servicing future Singaporean JSF in Australia.

As well, Australia's next DWP could deliver additional possibilities for bilateral defence cooperation. Undoubtedly, Singapore will watch very closely if the DWP indeed provides a new framework for increasing the ADF's peacetime engagement in Southeast Asia and whether it will be underpinned by adequate resourcing. But the DWP is likely to signal to key Southeast Asian countries an increased ambition of ADF regional defence engagement, particularly in the air and maritime domain.

Developing a 'strategic vision'

Equally important, the 2015 DWP is tasked to overhaul Australia's defence-industrial sector to, for instance, enhance multinational cooperation on defence technologies. In this context, both sides should consider enhancing Singapore-Australia cooperation in this sensitive area, for instance through closer interaction between Australia's Defence Science and Technology Organisation (DSTO) and Singapore's Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA).

Finally, beyond practical cooperation Singapore and Australian officials should initiate a discussion about the long-term strategic vision for the defence relationship. Australia's strong and Singapore's more tacit support for the US strategic 'rebalance' to Asia signal a mutual understanding that the regional security order could become even more contested.

If so, the Singapore-Australia defence relationship will inevitably be influenced by the changing regional great power dynamics. Consequently, both sides need to develop a mutual understanding on the implications of these shifts and discuss ways of smaller but pivotal powers such as Singapore and Australia to organise adequate responses. For instance, what could be the role of the FPDA in a changing Southeast Asian security order?

Such informal discussions will be a critical component towards achieving the goal of a comprehensive Singapore-Australia strategic partnership.

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