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Balancing Sino-US Tight Rope: Role of 'Smart Power'

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SYNOPSIS

The Sino-US rivalry has implications for small states like Singapore. How can the city-state maintain its sovereignty and relevance without being subsumed by the 'big powers'? The answer could lie in enhancing its 'smart power'.

COMMENTARY

SINGAPORE AND China recently commenced [Exercise Cooperation](#), a 10-day bilateral exercise between the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). In addition to this exercise, both militaries "interact regularly through high-level exchanges, mutual visits, cross-attendance of courses and port calls". According to the Ministry of Defence, Singapore (MINDEF) such engagement aims to underscore ["the warm and friendly bilateral relations between Singapore and China"](#).

Similarly, Singapore has long viewed the United States as a vital military partner. The militaries of both countries collaborate regularly through training exercises which include [Exercise Daring Warrior \(XDW\)](#). Additionally, the US is a major supplier of military technology, weaponry and facilities for Singapore. Such military cooperation can be understood as part of Singapore's use of 'smart power' to navigate the ongoing Sino-US rivalry.

'Smart Power' for Relevance

Singapore has actively sought to manage its relations with the US and China strategically and carefully. This is evident not only in the military domain but also in Singapore's political and economic interactions. By doing so, Singapore's objective is to maintain its geopolitical freedom of manoeuvre and prevent the possibility of

becoming a [vassal state](#). Expectedly, maintaining this dynamic stance between the two 'big powers' is extremely challenging.

Singapore's ability to walk this tightrope will largely be contingent on its ability to stay relevant – a state of affairs that has to be created and maintained, according to the former ambassador Bilahari Kausikan.

Creating relevance can be achieved by continuing to leverage on 'smart power'. 'Smart power' is a concept coined by eminent political scientist Joseph Nye to describe the combined usage of 'hard power' and 'soft power' in effective ways. It essentially suggests that a nation should leverage its diplomatic and non-diplomatic resources to amplify its influence to achieve national goals.

In the Singapore context, it has and continues to leverage military cooperation, multilateral network building and economic partnerships to safeguard Singapore's relevance amidst the Sino-US rivalry.

Military Exercises with US & China

With regard to military exchanges with China for instance, Exercise Cooperation and other bilateral exercises such as Exercise Maritime Cooperation are expected to increase in scale, as part of the proposed enhancements to the [Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation \(ADESC\)](#).

Regular military exchanges with the US will also continue. A key example includes [Exercise Tiger Balm](#). It was first conducted in 1981 and it is the longest-running military exercise between Singapore and the US, with a recent iteration having taken place in July this year. Over the years, the exercise has allowed the armies from both countries to share military expertise and strategies based on mutual trust and professionalism.

By engaging both the US and China militarily, Singapore attempts to reaffirm its positive relationship with China and balance its alignment with the US.

Trust Factor

In addition to military exchanges, public diplomacy through emphasising the importance of preserving the rules-based international order, is another important component employed to balance Singapore's relations between the US and China.

For instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has constantly reaffirmed the need for regional states to deepen integration under ASEAN, in order to mitigate divisions based on 'big power' alliances. This has involved engendering the diplomatic space for consensus-building through the continued investment in strengthening the ASEAN region's most comprehensive fora which include the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-PLUS (ADMM+) and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

In terms of economics, Singapore actively engages with the 'big powers' in trade. Specifically, free trade agreements (FTAs) represent a primary tool of Singapore's economic strategy.

The [US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement \(USSFTA\)](#) and the [China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement \(CSFTA\)](#) were implemented in 2005 and 2009 respectively. Both FTAs have enhanced transparency and streamlined regulations that have boosted investor confidence. This in turn has allowed Singapore to emerge as one of the top investors in the [US](#) and [China](#).

Stronger economic linkages in turn help nurture trust among the ‘big powers’ that can lead to non-economic spill over effects in political relations. This is increasingly evident in Singapore’s role as an ‘honest broker’, especially with both ‘big powers’ having signed the [Singapore Convention on Mediation](#).

‘Smart Power’: An Assessment

‘Smart power’ is a useful approach when dealing with the Sino-US rivalry, because it allows Singapore to utilise its political, economic and strategic resources to manoeuvre between the US and China. ‘Smart power’ keeps some avenues for cooperation open by entrenching the interdependence the ‘big powers’ share with Singapore.

‘Smart power’ also enables Singapore to nurture a shared understanding of its strategic narrative, which enhances the credibility and legitimacy of its foreign policy of non-alignment for the long term.

While ‘smart power’ may not represent the panacea to all challenges vis-à-vis ‘big power’ rivalry, it can represent a viable coping strategy. Hence, moving forward Singapore should continue to maintain and optimise its use of ‘smart power’. To do so requires a broad understanding of the current geopolitical landscape, a keen ability to anticipate emerging external threats and the acumen to proactively respond to a conflict from a multi-dimensional perspective.

Furthermore, a ‘whole of government’ strategic vision will be helpful in consolidating the use of Singapore’s political, economic and strategic resources. This could entail enhancing the organisational expertise and institutional agility to facilitate coordination among the different ministries involved in the economy, defence, diplomacy, and communications.

Singapore’s political, economic and strategic resources must continue to work in a synchronised and complementary manner. This would better enable the city-state to effectively leverage ‘smart power’ to navigate and respond to the Sino-US rivalry.

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