

## (Still) Supporting the Indispensable Power: Singapore's Relations with the United States from Trump to Biden

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Singapore regards the United States as an indispensable power whose global might, purpose, and reach Singaporeans have long viewed as invaluable to the stability, security, and prosperity of Asia. The United States has evolved from an unlikely collaborator and patron of Singapore following the 1971 British withdrawal east of the Suez Canal to being the city-state's invaluable partner today. As with other U.S. allies and partners, Singapore's relations with the United States were tested during the presidency of Donald Trump, who effectively recused his nation from the traditional role of global leadership it had played since the end of World War II. Yet Singapore chose to stay the course of its pragmatic encouragement and facilitation of the U.S. forward presence in Asia. The transition to the Biden administration, which presumably aims to walk back Trump's "America first" policy without easing up on China, has not changed Singapore's perspective on and policy toward the United States. It remains in Singapore's interest to continue welcoming, facilitating, and—in the face of growing Chinese objection to U.S. strategic dominance in the region—justifying the United States' place and role in Asia.

That said, Singapore's view of U.S. indispensability does not mean it will take Washington's side on every international issue and dispute, especially where Singapore's interests and the general well-being of the Asian region are thought to be at risk. Singapore is a consummate hedger that has long sought "to be a friend to all, but an enemy of none."<sup>1</sup> Its contemporary support of the United States has risked souring relations with China,

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<sup>1</sup> "Transcript of Remarks by Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at the MFA Townhall on 17 July 2017," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore), July 17, 2017 ~ <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2017/07/Transcript-of-Remarks-by-Minister-for-Foreign-Affairs-Dr-Vivian-Balakrishnan-at-the-MFA-Townhall-on>.

Singapore's top trading partner in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Thus understood, Singapore's qualified belief in U.S. leadership presupposes a United States that accepts not only its long-standing role as a world leader but equally the obligation to be a force for Asia's peace, prosperity, and security—a responsibility that, in Singapore's view, is better shared than hogged at a time when Beijing's strategic ambitions have risen concomitantly with China's growing military power and global influence. How the United States and its partners can work with China while balancing Chinese power and influence without causing regional discord is the key challenge. It is on that basis that Singapore will do what it can to help the United States restore its post-Trump credibility in Asia while seeking to ensure that U.S.-China tensions do not irreparably damage the region.

This essay contends that Singapore will continue to support the United States' forward presence in Asia while encouraging Washington and Beijing to accommodate one another and seek ways to cooperate amid their competitive relationship. Beginning with a short reflection on the city-state's propensity to hedge against the great powers, the essay then explores Singapore's ties with the United States from the Trump to the Biden administration.

### *Incorrigible Hedger*

Historically, Southeast Asian states have relied on hedging and shifting limited alignments, and Singapore is no exception.<sup>3</sup> Hedging is the inclination to adopt the *via media* between aligning with great powers and balancing them. States hedge to minimize risks and deny larger powers their ability to dominate without having to balance directly against them.<sup>4</sup> Neither passive neutralists nor fence-sitters, hedgers seek to engage multiple powers without becoming reliant on any single power. Short of the U.S.-China rivalry intensifying to Thucydidean proportions, it is not unreasonable to assume that Singapore will persist in hedging to create

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<sup>2</sup> Li Wenlong and Zhang Shimin, "Singapore's Prominent Role in China's Trade Strategy," ThinkChina, February 3, 2021 ≈ <https://www.thinkchina.sg/singapores-prominent-role-chinas-trade-strategy>.

<sup>3</sup> See John D. Ciorciari, *The Limits of Alignment: Southeast Asia and the Great Powers Since 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010); and Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, "Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia," *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 696–727.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Bloomfield, "To Balance or to Bandwagon? Adjusting to China's Rise During Australia's Rudd–Gillard Era," *Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 259.

strategic space and flexibility for itself as long as there is no undue pressure to take sides.<sup>5</sup>

Singapore has been described as having pursued a “balanced” foreign policy that assiduously avoids the impression that it is seeking to balance others—a difficult act made more necessary at a time when the city-state is caught in the middle of the U.S.-China competition.<sup>6</sup> Like the proverbial bird on a wire, Singapore’s perceived vulnerability as a small state in a rough neighborhood leaves it with few options but to make as many friends as possible.<sup>7</sup> As a former official once mused, Singaporeans are “perpetual worriers” who take nothing for granted and whose “constant restlessness...to stay relevant to the world” fosters in them an imaginativeness and inventiveness beyond the limits of their nation’s physical size.<sup>8</sup> That so-called inventiveness is finely (if at times, crassly) played out in classic hedging conduct: for example, less than a month after Prime Minister Lee signed the renewed defense memorandum of understanding over U.S. use of facilities in Singapore with President Trump in New York in September 2019, his defense minister signed an enhanced defense agreement with China in Beijing. That said, Singapore does not behave uniformly toward the two major powers. Its hedging continues to be informed by a general preference for the United States as the strategic guarantor, in concert with like-minded powers and regional countries, of regional order and security in Asia—a responsibility that Singaporean security planners do not believe China (or any nation other than the United States) is ready to take up in the foreseeable future. Yet Singapore’s leaders have always taken pains to insist that their preference for U.S. leadership does and should not be misconstrued as an unqualified, enduring endorsement of the United States at the expense of other great powers.

### *Supporting U.S. Engagement*

Arguably, Singapore has been the United States’ most enthusiastic and reliable security partner in Southeast Asia. Although it houses no

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<sup>5</sup> See David Shambaugh, “U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (2018): 85–127; and See Seng Tan, “Consigned to Hedge: Southeast Asia and America’s ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ Strategy,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 131–48.

<sup>6</sup> Ankit Panda, “Singapore: A Small Asian Heavyweight,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 16, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/singapore-small-asian-heavyweight>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Lim, “Foreword,” in *The Little Red Dot: Reflections by Singapore’s Diplomats*, ed. Tommy Koh and Chang Li Lin (Singapore: World Scientific, 2005), vii–viii.

U.S. military bases, the State Department has acknowledged that “the access, basing, and overflight privileges granted by Singapore advance U.S. government and allied efforts to bolster a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>9</sup> Since 1991, Singapore has hosted Task Force 73/Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific, which provides combat-ready logistics for the Seventh Fleet, and, since 2013 and 2016 respectively, has hosted rotational deployments of U.S. Navy littoral combat ships and P-8A surveillance aircraft. In the post–September 11 era, Singapore participated in the U.S.-led war coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it has played a key role in U.S. counterpiracy efforts (including taking command of the Gulf of Aden counterpiracy Combined Task Force 151 on no less than five occasions between 2009 and 2021). Singapore was the first country in Southeast Asia to join the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS and security arrangements like the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Container Security Initiative, and the Megaports Initiative. Both countries participate regularly in bilateral military exercises, such as Pacific Griffin and Tiger Balm, and in multilateral exercises, such as the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) and Red Flag, among others. Over a thousand Singaporean military personnel currently participate in training, exercises, and professional military education in the United States in places like Luke Air Force Base and Silverbell Army Heliport in Arizona and Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, where Singaporean F-16, AH-64D, and F-15SG crews train alongside their American counterparts.

In 2003, President George W. Bush reportedly invited Singapore to become a major non-NATO ally, which Singapore declined owing to the political sensitivities with its Muslim neighbors Indonesia and Malaysia that any such acceptance might have provoked. Instead, the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement named Singapore as a “major security cooperation partner” of the United States, while the State Department has referred to Singapore as one of the United States’ “strongest bilateral partners in Southeast Asia [that] plays an indispensable role in supporting the region’s security and economic framework.”<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding some unforeseen hiccups in the Biden administration’s engagement of the region,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation with Singapore,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 20, 2021 ≈ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-singapore>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Singapore, for example, canceled the 2021 World Economic Forum and Shangri-La Dialogue due to the pandemic, and technical glitches prevented a video conference from taking place between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Southeast Asian counterparts in May.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s in-person visit to Singapore in July 2021 underscored the strength of the two countries’ partnership. In particular, several “high-end” initiatives were jointly announced at the meeting, such as the hosting of Singapore’s future F-35B fighter aircraft detachment at Ebbing Air National Guard Base in Arkansas, the establishment of a Singaporean fighter training detachment in Guam, and participation in the multilateral Counter-Terrorism Information Facility in Singapore and the multinational Artificial Intelligence Partnership for Defense hosted by the U.S. Department of Defense.

Granted, the bilateral partnership has had rough patches over the years. For example, Singapore’s pragmatic view of security collaboration with the United States led the State Department to accuse Singapore of adopting an inconsistent, selective, and transactional approach to counterterrorism cooperation.<sup>12</sup> Nor has Singapore evaded the State Department’s customary citation of alleged human rights abuses via its annual country reports. Yet these are mere speedbumps in an otherwise robust and perdurable relationship.

### *Managing U.S. Petulance*

Singapore’s partnership with the United States was tested during the Trump years as the impact of the America-first policy took hold in Asia, including the withdrawal of the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (an agreement Singapore strongly supported), pressure on U.S. allies and partners to step up their financial and strategic commitments, sweeping accusations that Asian states (including Singapore) were cheating in trade against the United States, and an anti-China slant in the “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy. Despite proclaiming the death of Barack Obama’s “rebalance to Asia,” Trump’s policy gutted the rebalance of its economic and multilateral dimensions while reinforcing its military dimension: in contrast with the Obama administration’s 5 freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, the Trump administration conducted 27—4 in 2017, 6 in 2018, 8 in 2019, and 9 in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Compared with larger and more protectionist-minded neighbors such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, Singapore has been more adversely affected economically by the combined impact of the U.S.-China trade war and the

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012* (Washington, D.C., 2013), 53.

<sup>13</sup> Jeff M. Smith, “Biden Must Keep Challenging China on Freedom of Navigation,” *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2021  <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/biden-south-china-sea-spratlys>.

pandemic.<sup>14</sup> Singapore nonetheless persisted in its long-standing mission to facilitate and support the forward U.S. presence in the region.

It was against this backdrop that Prime Minister Lee issued a warning at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue against what he felt was unhelpful U.S. talk of “containing China”<sup>15</sup> that reportedly left the U.S. officials fuming and their Chinese counterparts cheering. In a 2020 reflection in *Foreign Affairs* on the impact that evolving U.S.-China ties could have on Asia, Lee contended that Washington and Beijing “must work out a *modus vivendi* that will be competitive in some areas without allowing rivalry to poison cooperation in others.”<sup>16</sup> Lee’s concern had to do with the potential—and, in Singapore’s view, undesirable—formation of rival blocs to manage China’s rise; in response, he proposed that the Quad should evolve into “an inclusive and open regional architecture.”<sup>17</sup> This is not to imply that Singapore prefers to let China necessarily have its way. Singapore’s support for the 2016 arbitral tribunal decision to deny Chinese claims to much of the South China Sea, for example, severely complicated its relations with China. Its persistent support for Taiwan has also provoked Beijing’s ire on several occasions, and it has been at the receiving end of Chinese influence operations, including cyberattacks. In the long shadow cast by China across Asia, where Beijing’s proprietary interests and sense of ownership loom large, the line between doing what Singapore can and suffering what it must is a fine one. Singapore’s success depends on whether it can persuade both big powers to ease off their respective throttles and dial back the tensions that have hitherto defined and framed their strategic rivalry. This strategy will likely require a mutual rediscovery and renewal of their grand bargain—the search for a “*modus vivendi*,” in Lee’s words—that will allow for a healthy level of collaboration to be restored between the two powers amid their competition.

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<sup>14</sup> “Singapore, Malaysia Could Be Most Exposed to U.S.-China Trade War: OCBC,” *Business Times*, January 7, 2021 ~ <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/asean-business/singapore-malaysia-could-be-most-exposed-to-us-china-trade-war-ocbc-0>.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Hsien Loong (keynote address at the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, May 31, 2019) ~ <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-at-the-IISS-Shangri-La-Dialogue-2019>.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Hsien Loong, “The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-04/lee-hsien-loong-endangered-asian-century>.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Tan, “Consigned to Hedge,” 141.

### *Urging Mutual Restraint*

Joe Biden's electoral victory was greeted with cautious optimism in Singapore. While his promise to restore the United States to its traditional involvement in collaborative international leadership was welcomed, Singapore continues to view with concern the bipartisan American consensus on "getting tough" with China.<sup>18</sup> Arguing that the insistence on treating China as a threat—and the tit-for-tat dynamics it has engendered between the two major powers—bodes ill for the world, Singapore's leaders believe the quest for mutual moderation by the major powers is of utmost importance to building stability and predictability in U.S.-China ties.<sup>19</sup> Even Singapore's realpolitik-minded leaders insist that the region's stability and security stem from states' voluntary restraint and moderation as much as the equilibrating effects of structural forces.<sup>20</sup> Against the growing animus shaping U.S.-China relations, Singapore seeks to remind both major powers that the making and conduct of foreign policy ought to be driven by prudence, not passion; by moderation, not maximalism.<sup>21</sup>

The appeal to mutual moderation has at least two auxiliary pleas. Firstly, accepting the likely "new normal" of big-power rivalry, Singapore hopes that the United States and China can and should nonetheless find common cause and seize opportunities to collaborate. "It is natural for big powers to compete," Prime Minister Lee observed, "but it is their capacity for cooperation that is the true test of statecraft."<sup>22</sup> For his part, Goh Chok Tong, a former prime minister of Singapore, has urged Asian nations to "encourage the U.S. and China towards [the] scenario of competition and cooperation, and reiterate the position that the Pacific, and certainly the world, is large enough for these two superpowers to work together."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

<sup>19</sup> David A. Wemer, "Singapore's Prime Minister Has a Message for the U.S.: Don't Choose China Confrontation or Asia Withdrawal," Atlantic Council, New Atlanticist, July 28, 2020 ~ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/singapores-prime-minister-has-a-message-for-the-us-dont-choose-china-confrontation-or-asia-withdrawal>.

<sup>20</sup> Graham Allison and Robert D. Blackwill, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Minnie Chan and Catherine Wong, "Singapore Prime Minister Urges China and U.S. Not to Pressure Small Nations to Take Sides during Shangri-La Dialogue," *South China Morning Post*, June 1, 2019 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3012690/singapore-prime-minister-urges-china-and-us-not-pressure-small>.

<sup>22</sup> Lee, "The Endangered Asian Century."

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Chang May Choon, "Asia Can Be the Moderate Voice in U.S.-China Clash: Goh Chok Tong," *Straits Times*, May 15, 2019 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/asia-can-be-the-moderate-voice-in-us-china-clash>.

While those entreaties seem sensible, where might they even begin? Realistically, one cannot expect U.S.-China cooperation in the post-Trump era to immediately go from zero to sixty, as underscored by tense high-level meetings in Anchorage in March and Tianjin in July. According to Thomas Wright, U.S.-China diplomacy goals should initially be modest to avoid unintentional provocations and to facilitate transactional cooperation on shared interests.<sup>24</sup> While mention of transactional cooperation may conjure the disquieting memory of Trump's transactional foreign policy, it is an acknowledgment that countries that differ sharply in values, as in the case of the United States and China, may need to start where the fruit hangs low and where expectation levels are manageable.

Secondly, Singapore urges that the United States share power with China and that China accept the United States' rightful place and role in Asia. Singaporean leaders believe the effort to accommodate China's aspirations within the current system of international rules and norms is well worth making as it creates a safer and stabler environment for both cooperation and competition to coexist. That said, power-sharing and mutual recognition between contesting leviathans is a challenging proposition. Having dispensed with Deng Xiaoping's dictum to "hide our strength, bide our time," the China of Xi Jinping no longer seems willing to countenance giving the United States a continued say in Asia's regional security.<sup>25</sup> But it takes two to tango. "A larger and more powerful China should not only respect global rules and norms but also take on greater responsibility for upholding and updating the international order under which it has prospered so spectacularly," Lee urged. "Where the existing rules and norms are no longer fit for purpose, China should collaborate with the United States and other countries to work out revised arrangements that all can live with."<sup>26</sup>

## *Conclusion*

Helping the United States regain its footing and credibility in Asia after Trump and amid its strategic rivalry with China—and doing so


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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Wright, "The U.S. and China Finally Get Real with Each Other," Brookings Institution, March 22, 2021 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/22/the-us-and-china-finally-get-real-with-each-other>.


<sup>25</sup> See "Full Text: Keynote Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021," Xinhua, April 20, 2021 ~ [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c\\_139893137.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/20/c_139893137.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Lee, "The Endangered Asian Century."



while maintaining a balancing act between them—could ultimately prove a fool’s errand for Singapore, as a former top Singapore diplomat has admitted.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, neither passivity nor taking sides is feasible, as either could leave Singapore and the region susceptible to intimidation by or overreliance on great powers. In his IISS-Fullerton Lecture in Singapore, Secretary Austin, referencing Lee’s appeal, reassured his regional audience that Washington does not expect Singapore or any other country to choose the United States over China—even as the U.S. president promises the world a billion vaccines gratis for Covid-19 and, together with the G-7 leaders, an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. To Singaporean ears, those initiatives are among the likely telltale signs that the United States is back. 

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<sup>27</sup> Bilahari Kausikan, “No Sweet Spot for Singapore in U.S.-China Tensions,” *Straits Times*, May 30, 2019  <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/no-sweet-spot-for-spore-in-us-china-tensions>.