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The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Why it Matters to Singapore's National Security

By Arvind Raj

SYNOPSIS

Being a small state situated far away from the Middle East, Singapore has little diplomatic and political clout to create any direct impact on peace and stability there. However, Singapore has key national security priorities regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and has undertaken actions to safeguard these interests.

COMMENTARY

Since Hamas' terrorist attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, the Singapore government – through various statements and interviews given by members of the Cabinet – has made clear Singapore's diplomatic positions on the current Israel-Hamas war, and on the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Singapore's vote in favour of the non-binding resolution "Protection of Civilians and Upholding Legal and Humanitarian Obligations" at the 10th Emergency Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) crystallises its positions on the issue. Singapore's views are as follows: Hamas conducted a massive terrorist attack on Israel; Israel has the right to self-defence under international law but has to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity in compliance with its obligations under international law; there should be immediate and unrestricted access of humanitarian aid to the people in Gaza, and; the only viable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a negotiated two-state solution based on relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

Singapore has several priorities concerning this conflict. The external dimensions involve stressing the primacy of international law to safeguard the principle of self-defence, and the need to maintain stable ties with key bilateral partners. The internal dimensions involve ensuring public safety and preventing that conflict from creating fissures in Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.

The External Dimension: Importance of International Law and Bilateral Relationships

Small states like Singapore rely on international law to defend their sovereignty and territorial integrity. In this regard, Singapore's Explanation of Vote, delivered by Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Burhan Gafoor, is particularly significant. He stated that while Singapore supports all efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the resolution was lacking as it had failed to condemn Hamas' role in perpetrating the terrorist attacks, and it also did not acknowledge Israel's legitimate right to defend its people and territory (in compliance with international law).

Two key points that are crucial to Singapore's national security must be emphasised. First, this failure to condemn a terrorist attack sets a dangerous precedent in terms of what is acceptable or not in international relations. Second, the failure to acknowledge a state's legitimate right to defend itself is an erosion of the legitimacy and utility of having such a principle under international law – a principle that Singapore would have to rely on should it need to defend itself from threats from state or non-state actors.

Reaffirming these points is vital to Singapore's national security interests as these threats are not hypothetical thought experiments. Singapore is still a lucrative target for terror networks and has faced such incidents in the past. One only has to recall the bombing of McDonald House along Orchard Road during Sukarno's Konfrontasi in 1965, or the threats from the Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist network Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in 2001 and 2002.

Singapore's national security priorities in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are linked directly to stable relations with our closest neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, which have Malay-Muslim majorities that frequently experience more politically charged atmospherics from the antagonism between the Israelis and Palestinians. Unlike Singapore, both neighbours have refused to recognise Israel until a two-state solution is achieved. Singapore has developed diplomatic relations and functional cooperation with the Palestinian authorities while Malaysia and Indonesia have strong broad-based ties with the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank.

Therefore, it is significant that at the 10th Singapore-Malaysia Leaders' Retreat held on 30 October 2023, both Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim agreed that their different diplomatic positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not affect the bilateral relationship. It was also noteworthy that Prime Minister Anwar pointed out the similarities in Singapore's and Malaysia's positions, such as the vote in favour of protecting civilians and ending the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, as it showed a willingness to accentuate areas of agreement.

The Internal Dimension: The Importance of Safeguarding Social Cohesion

The fundamental organising principle of Singapore society is one that is multiracial, multireligious, and multicultural – with equal stakes for every Singaporean regardless of race, language or religion. However, the religious overtones of the Israel-Hamas

war, and the potential of the war to polarise views, can threaten Singapore's social cohesion and our multi-cultural way of life.

Cognisant of this, the government, religious leaders, and many Singaporeans have been proactive in calming emotions within society. First, Singapore leaders have held closed-door dialogue sessions with leaders and members of various religious communities to explain Singapore's international position on the issue, and to allow these leaders to explain Singapore's stance to their congregations.

Second, the Mufti of Singapore and the Chief Rabbi of Singapore exchanged letters in the immediate aftermath of Israel's military response to the terrorist attacks to stress how both communities have coexisted peacefully in Singapore, and the need to further strengthen these ties as they come under strain from the conflict in the Middle East.

Third, the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), the oldest interfaith organisation comprising leaders and members from 10 different religions, conducted a collective interfaith prayer with 100 members of the various religious communities. These actions are not hollow gestures as they highlight to Singaporeans the importance of maintaining calm to reduce the chances of societal fault lines emerging.

Singaporeans from various racial and religious groups, interfaith organisations, and grassroots bodies have also come together to support humanitarian relief efforts in Gaza. The media highlighted monetary donations and contributions of urgently needed supplies such as medicine for the affected civilian population.

What Lies Ahead

The crisis in Gaza shows no signs of abating. On 1 November, Israel conducted an airstrike on a refugee camp in northern Gaza. It was also reported that members of Israel's war cabinet are pushing for the full annexation of Gaza. Such developments are bound to create a more charged atmosphere in societies everywhere, including Singapore.

While the people of Singapore have done well in keeping emotions stable, we should continue to keep channels open for interfaith dialogues. This will help to ensure that Singapore maintains social resilience, particularly since the overall international discourse on the conflict is likely to get more polarised in the coming weeks and months.

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