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Singapore's Perspective on Security and the Major Challenges – ASEAN and Open Regionalism

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Introduction

Singapore's security and survival rests on two fundamental tenets – diplomacy and deterrence. The first requires it to be strategic in thinking, astute in actions, and the second rests on building a strong economy and military. An acute awareness of its limitations in size and its geographical location has long produced a heightened sense of vulnerability. To overcome its limitations and vulnerability in the global arena, the Singapore government has adopted a complex mix of strategies and policies, guided by a strong dose of pragmatism. These strategies as noted by several analysts range from "the more hard-nosed belief of needing great power balancing and Singapore having its own credible military force, to being a firm adherent of international law and economic multilateralism while advocating the construction of common norms, values and identity under the aegis of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations" (Tan, Ho and Koh, 2013).

Singapore boasts of a well-equipped and modern military force supported by its citizens' reserve trained through military conscription. Defence spending as percentage of the government's budget is among one of the highest in the world. The defence philosophy is one that is based on total defence and deterrence. Total defence here encompasses economic, military, social, civil and psychological defence. For Singapore, military capability together with economic success, social cohesion and a resilient population is the key to its long term survival.

Being a small country, Singapore is keenly aware of its limitations in material hard power despite having the most advanced and technologically well-equipped defence force. Hence it has also invested greatly in diplomacy. Singapore has established diplomatic relations with 187 sovereign states and participates in all major multilateral forums and international institutions. Singapore is a founding member of ASEAN, and an initiator of various multilateral forums from the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to the Global Governance Group (3G) (small states' response to G20) to encourage dialogue and cooperation.

Yet despite all these achievements and economic success, Singapore continued to feel a deep sense of insecurity. The Singapore government has never failed to remind its citizens to be vigilant and not to take their success for granted. The vulnerability discourse is still very much in vogue.

So what is perceived as the biggest threat to Singapore's success and survival? Let me broadly divide them into three levels – domestic, regional and global, and elaborate on each of them before connecting the dots to see how some of the issues feed into one another.

Domestic Concerns

By all indicators, Singapore has been a success story of development. Singapore was able to leverage on its strategic geographical location with a natural harbour and build on its role as a regional entrepot during the British colonial rule to become a transport, trans-shipment logistics, and trading hub. Its small population and lack of natural resources and hinterland forced the country to adopt a very open approach towards trade and foreign investments. Its economic policy is premised on the broad framework of globalization, and the need to transcend its limitations to become a global city. Singapore made it clear right from the day of its independence that it would trade with any country that was willing to trade with it, and would not let ideological differences stand in the way.

Trade is indeed an important lifeline of the Singapore economy and the country has the highest trade to GDP ratio in the world at over 400%. It is why Singapore is an ardent supporter of WTO and a free and open global trading order. It also explains why in its foreign policy, Singapore seeks order and invests much in achieving a durable and stable balance of power in its external environment (Ting, 2010:62-73).

Yet, Singapore's dependence on trade and foreign investments is also a source of vulnerability. It is susceptible to global shifts in economic fortunes and has to constantly change and adapt to remain economically relevant and competitive. Any significant retreat from globalization and free trade would have significant impact on the Singapore's economy. Hence, the current tide of rising economic nationalism in the region and increased doubts on the benefits of globalization is a source of concern for Singapore. In short, disorder and de-globalisation would culminate as the greatest threat to Singapore's survival and success.

As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, Singapore is also keenly aware of the need for social cohesion and to have a tightly organised society in order to survive. The diversities that are celebrated in Singapore are also seen as a source of vulnerability. Hence, strict laws and policies have been in place to maintain order and harmony amongst the different ethnic and religious groups. At the same time, the need for Singapore to remain open for trade and to attract investments and the rising education levels of its people exposed to external influence meant a society that is increasingly under stress from rising expectations, heightened inequalities, influx of

migrants, increasing religiosity within society, etc. The large and continuous immigration flows into Singapore for more than a decade has sparked a significant backlash in the most recent elections in Singapore causing the government to take a pause. A rare case of a riot after more four decades of social stability rocked the government to the increasing fault lines in society that need to be addressed. In the eyes of the Singapore government, maintaining social cohesion in the light of different pressures from outside and within has become one of its key security concerns.

Singapore has so far succeeded because of a strong government and now the concern and focus is building a strong, cohesive and resilient society that can withstand the different tensions and setbacks.

Shifting Regional and Global Order

Much of Singapore's inter-connected security concerns now arise from the fact that the world is at a critical juncture where great transition is taking place as power becomes more diffused and the centre of gravity is also shifting. The American unipolar moment is dissipating. The United States (US) remains predominant being the number one economic power, and having the strongest military. However, the US can no longer attain its global objectives and exercise leadership on its own. The global order that has been shaped by the Americans and its western allies is increasingly being challenged by other actors. In addition the price of American leadership is also increasingly being questioned by the US domestic audience. The system is therefore in a flux with more uncertainties and volatility, and hence there is a great deal of anxiety.

This general uncertainty and the big question over how the relations between the US and China will develop in the years to come is of great concern to Singapore. Sino-US relationship looms large and how this bilateral relationship is managed will be the key in the emerging global order. In East and Southeast Asia where the rise of China is most keenly felt, it will also be an arena where the leadership of the US is most contested. US presence in the broader Asia-Pacific is necessary but no longer sufficient for the security of the region, and while this insufficiency is recognized by most, there is not yet a consensus as to what should be put in place to complement or supplement the US security guarantee. This is one of the main reasons for the emergence of a patchwork of alliances and a proliferation of regional forums and processes.

Closer to home, the rise of China and the tensions between Beijing and Washington in the South China Sea has become a central concern for Singapore. The

complexities of the situation in South China Sea involving several claimants, with overlapping issues over sea lanes of communications and it becoming an arena of big-power contest between China and the US are generating dynamics that could lead to unpredictable outcomes. Singapore because of its structural vulnerabilities is keenly aware of the importance of a stable and peaceful neighbourhood. Any uncertainties and instabilities that can rock the investors' confidence in the region will be bad for Singapore. Singapore therefore works both on its own and within ASEAN to build amicable ties with both the US and China, and to bring both powers into various ASEAN-centred multilateral frameworks.

While major powers rivalries are strategic concerns that serve as the backdrop for many of Singapore's pragmatic policies to achieve a balance between the US and China, and to strengthen ASEAN's ability to manage the complexities of the relationship, many of Singapore's more immediate challenges are non-traditional security issues ranging from transnational terrorism, organised crimes to cyber security and climate change.

International terrorism has been one of Singapore's utmost security concerns since the discovery of a plot to attack American's and Israeli's interests in Singapore in 2001. The rise of jihadist terrorism in particular posed additional concerns because of Singapore's own Muslim minorities, and that Southeast Asia is host to the largest Muslim communities. The seeming success of ISIS in using social media to recruit foreign fighters and the emergence of Southeast Asia as a key recruitment centre for ISIS has brought the threat right to the doorstep.

The dissonance arising from globalisation with increasing economic interdependence but signs of political fragmentation as a result of nationalism and identity politics feeds into other transnational issues – from religious radicalisation and foreign fighters from Southeast Asia joining the self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria – are challenges that Singapore look on with genuine concern.

Addressing many of these transnational security threats required cooperation and good working relationships with it Southeast Asian neighbours, and that is the reason why Singapore invests its efforts in promoting regional cooperation.

Being a financial hub and a small but open economy also meant that Singapore watched with concern the increasing economic nationalism around the world, including to some extent amongst Singaporeans who are against immigration, and shouting "Singapore for Singaporeans" slogan.

The worldview of Singapore and the threats it perceived are coloured by its inherent vulnerability due to its physical constraints – its small size and lack of natural resources; the social realities of a diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society; and the economic strategy of opening itself wide to trade and investments.

Singapore is highly susceptible to any changes in its external environment and that has resulted in what some criticised as a certain "paranoia" and "siege mentality". But it is also this heightened sense of vulnerability that compelled Singapore to take diplomacy and deterrence seriously, and to constantly seek new approaches and opportunities to secure its environment. It is paranoid but not paralysed.

The Singapore government takes nothing for granted. It is highly sensitised to any regional and global developments that could potentially affect the general stability of its immediate region, and specific threats emanating from non-traditional sources, from climate change to cyber security, from international terrorism to rising nationalism.

Its investment in ASEAN is one of its many strategies to cope with the different challenges, and it has paid dividends, even though some critics may think otherwise. And its balancing act to maintain good relations with both China and the US is also something it will not take for granted.

Conclusion

Singapore's vulnerabilities are inherently intertwined with external shocks and events in the global and regional arena. A shifting global landscape and the geopolitical situation feeding the competition between major powers, and in particular that between the US and China implied a more uncertain security and economic environment. Singapore has to be both resilient and nimble in order to survive and thrive. It has to be nimble enough to respond to the changes quickly, but at the same time resilient enough to withstand the frequent shocks.

Astute diplomacy and deterrence built on the concept of total defence will remain as the central tenets of Singapore's management of the uncertain environment. Security threats are viewed from a multi-dimensional lens, and closely intertwined. As former permanent secretary of the Foreign Affairs ministry observed, Singapore's foreign policy is also increasingly drawn into domestic discussions. Henceforth, the whole of government approach is seen as the way forward in dealing with the different challenges facing Singapore.

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