

The U.S.-Singapore Partnership: A Critical Element of U.S. Engagement and Stability in the Asia-Pacific

Lynn Kuok

Singapore and the United States, though not formal allies,¹ have enjoyed a broad and deep partnership that has spanned decades. The relationship, based on a shared belief that a strong U.S. presence in the region is vital for peace, stability and prosperity, extends across the security, economic and people-to-people realms and has made important contributions to regional stability. This has benefitted the United States, Singapore and other countries in the region, including China. President Barack Obama's decision to host a state dinner for Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in August this year to mark the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries highlights the administration's recognition of the importance of this relationship. Yet, precisely because Singapore is a good and reliable partner, it is easy to take it for granted. The next administration must understand and appreciate the contributions—and constraints—of the partnership if it is to flourish moving forwards.

An uncertain environment

Singapore is one of the United States' most committed partners in the region. This commitment stems from

a deep-rooted sense of insecurity about its external environment and a firm belief that the United States' presence helps to preserve Singapore's autonomy and options, as well as maintain the peace and stability that has undergirded the region's economic growth.

Singapore's sense of insecurity has, in a sense, been present from its creation. It is a small, multi-ethnic city-state that would disappear into many lakes in the United States.² Singapore's history—a sudden separation from Malaysia of which it was a part till 1965, and race riots in the 1960s, as well as geography—it is positioned amidst larger majority Muslim neighbors, have left it with an acute sense of vulnerability.

Two factors continue to feed that sense of vulnerability today. The first concerns developments within its Muslim-majority neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia, and is less publicly spoken about given its sensitivity. The second factor relates to the larger regional situation.

(a) Singapore's immediate neighborhood

Singapore is situated just south of Malaysia and a causeway measuring under a mile connects the two

¹ Singapore has pointedly underscored that it is not a U.S. treaty ally. See Chan Heng Chee (2012), "The limits of U.S.-Singapore military alliance", *The Washington Post*, January 30, https://www.washingtonpost.com/pb/opinions/the-limits-of-us-singapore-military-alliance/2012/01/30/gIQAkAoJdQ_story.html. The author was Singapore's ambassador to the United States.

² This point was made by Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs in his recent speech: "Statesmen's Forum: Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore", Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., June 9, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/events/statesmens-forum-vivian-balakrishnan-minister-foreign-affairs-singapore>

countries. It takes less than an hour to drive from many parts of Singapore to Malaysia and many Malaysians (and Singaporeans) make that commute each day to go to school or work. While Singapore's relations with Malaysia are generally cordial, the ethnic and political situation in the country is watched carefully. The population mix in Singapore and Malaysia is similar, though ethnic proportions are roughly the mirror image of each other.³ In 1969, ethnic violence in Malaysia spilled over into Singapore and the fear is that this might happen again. Current assessments appear rather grim: a senior Singapore official warns of the political and social space for non-Muslims in Malaysia "narrowing significantly and continuing to shrink", of race relations in Malaysia being "fraught", and of the "unpredictability" of an increasingly Islamic government.⁴

Singapore also keeps a close eye on Indonesia, Southeast Asia's largest country and the world's largest Muslim population. Between 1963 and 1966, Indonesian nationalism manifested itself in *konfrontasi* (confrontation) to *ganjang* (crush) Malaysia (of which Singapore till 1965 was still a part). There were over 40 bomb attacks in about two years in Singapore alone.⁵ Nationalism in Indonesia today takes less violent forms, but Singapore remains concerned to preserve its autonomy.⁶

Singapore's partnership with the United States allows it to procure defense equipment and technology that gives it a military edge to deter its neighbors in the event of worsening ties. It also complicates its neighbors' security calculations by introducing the possibility that the United States might defend Singapore if not militarily, then at least politically.⁷

But there are also alarming threats in Singapore and its immediate neighborhood of more recent origin. In March this year, Singapore arrested three individuals who had taken up arms in Yemen and a fourth who was on his way to join a Kurdish militia group fighting ISIS.⁸ Hundreds in Malaysia and Indonesia have joined ISIS in the Middle East. Volunteers from Southeast Asia together form a battalion in ISIS called *Katibah Nusantara*. With around 600 people, possibly more, joining ISIS from Southeast Asia, ISIS is a far greater threat to the region than Al Qaeda had ever been.⁹ Singapore feels particularly vulnerable being "in the middle, an oasis of calm and a prime target for all."¹⁰ The 2005 *Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security* and the 2015 *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement*, discussed below, allow for greater counterterrorism cooperation between Singapore and the United States. Singapore is also part of the U.S.-led Counter-ISIS Coalition.

³ Singapore's population is about 75 per cent Chinese; its largest minority group is Malay-Muslim at almost 15 per cent of the population. In Malaysia, Malay-Muslims constitute over 50% of the population, whereas Chinese are the largest minority at over 20%. The third largest ethnic group in both countries is Indian.

⁴ Email, senior Singapore official, May 30, 2016.

⁵ Bilahari Kausikan (2014), "Indonesia's naming of navy ship: Sensitivity is a two-way street", *The Straits Times*, February 13, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/indonesias-naming-of-navy-ship-sensitivity-is-a-two-way-street-says-ambassador-at-large>

⁶ In 2014, for instance, Singapore stood firm in signaling its displeasure for Jakarta's decision to name a new frigate after two Indonesian marines executed in 1968 for a 1965 terror attack in Singapore. *Ibid*.

⁷ Email, senior Singapore official, May 30, 2016.

⁸ Lim Yan Liang (2016) "4 Singaporeans arrested under ISA for involvement in armed violence abroad", *The Straits Times*, March 16, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/4-singaporeans-arrested-under-isa-for-involvement-in-armed-violence-abroad>

⁹ "PM Lee Hsien Loong's interview with Wall Street Journal (WSJ) on 29 March 2016", transcript of interview on Prime Minister's Office Singapore website, <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-interview-wall-street-journal-wsj#six>

¹⁰ Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, quoted in Zakir Hussain (2016), "Singapore to step up its strategy to counter terrorism as threat of attack rises: Shanmugam", *The Straits Times*, March 18, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-to-step-up-its-strategy-to-counter-terrorism-as-threat-of-attack-rises-shanmugam>

(b) The broader region

In today's climate, it is easy to assume that the U.S.-Singapore partnership is directed against a rising China. But security links between the United States and Singapore date back to the late 1960s when Singapore, as part of its own fight against communism, supported Washington's war effort in Vietnam by providing maintenance and resupply facilities for U.S. Navy operations.¹¹

Even after the threat of communism waned, Singapore considered the United States a "vital element" of the regional balance.¹² In 1990, when the Philippines decided that it would close Clark and Subic bases, and countries like Malaysia and Indonesia were against U.S. basing in the region,¹³ Singapore stepped up to offer the United States use of its air base and port. It worried about the destabilizing effects that a power vacuum would have: "Japan will be forced to re-arm. China and Korea will oppose Japan and a whole chain reaction of destabilization will be triggered off in the region."¹⁴ Today, Singapore remains firm in its stance that the U.S. security guarantee keeps the region stable and prevents Japan and the Republic of Korea from going nuclear.¹⁵

But while the U.S.-Singapore partnership is not directed against China, China certainly features in the

equation. Whether in the political, economic or social realms, China's rise has reverberated across the region. Singapore, like many other countries, considers China's growth a positive development: it generates tremendous economic opportunities and China is Singapore's number one trading partner. China's rise, however, has not come without its challenges. Singapore officials have behind closed doors and in their private capacity expressed concerns about how Chinese officials demand a certain obeisance beyond legitimate demands for respect.¹⁶

Yet, by far the greatest concern is Chinese behavior in the South China Sea. Singapore is not a claimant in the South China Sea and does not take sides on sovereignty claims over land features. It stands together with the United States in "reaffirm[ing] the importance of maintaining regional peace and stability and upholding the freedom of navigation in and overflight over the South China Sea (SCS)"; "emphasiz[ing] the importance for all parties to resolve their claims calmly and peacefully in accordance with international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)", and "urg[ing] all parties to exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities and to avoid action that would escalate tensions, including the further militarization of outposts in the SCS."¹⁷ Any conflict in the South China Sea would severely disrupt trade and Singapore's economy.

¹¹ "Singapore and the U.S.: security partners, not allies", The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Volume 19 Comment 24, August 2013.

¹² Email, senior Singapore official, May 30, 2016.

¹³ "Singapore" in *U.S. alliances and emerging partnerships in Southeast Asia: Out of the shadows*, a report of the Center for Strategic and International Studies Southeast Asia Initiative, July 2009, pp 31-42, p 34.

¹⁴ "Global restructuring and the prospects for Southeast Asia," keynote address by Minister for Information and the Arts and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs BG (Res) George Yeo, Wall Street Journal Capital Markets Conference, Singapore, January 16, 1992, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdffdoc/yybg19920116s.pdf>

¹⁵ "Statesmen's Forum: Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore", *supra* n 2.

¹⁶ As an example of the latter, see Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan's third IPS-Nathan lecture, "Dealing with an ambiguous world: ASEAN & US-China Competition in Southeast Asia", March 30, 2016, pp 12-13, http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/04/IPS-Nathan-Lectures-Lecture-III-ASEAN-US-China-Competition-in-Southeast-Asia_300316.pdf Ambassador Kausikan was speaking in his personal capacity.

¹⁷ "Joint Statement on the 4th United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue", January 22, 2016, Singapore, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/01/251668.htm>

More fundamentally, Singapore sees the dispute as a proxy for strategic competition between the United States and China—the single most important bilateral relationship for peace and prosperity in the region and elsewhere in the decades to come. It thus regards it as critical that the parameters of acceptable behavior, that is, behavior conforming to the rule of law, are laid down and adhered to.

Singapore welcomes U.S. presence as a counterweight to a rising China and considers Singapore's interest best served if the United States maintains a preeminent position, though in a manner that accommodates China's rise.¹⁸ At a speech to the Chinese Central Party School in 2012, Prime Minister Lee defended the United States' continued presence in the region on the basis of its "legitimate long-term interests in Asia", and argued that it "plays a role in Asia which no other country can", not just because of its military or economic strength, but for historical reasons."¹⁹

Sustaining U.S. presence for peace and prosperity

The United States shares with Singapore its assessment that a weakened U.S. presence would destabilize the region, and that China's rise is both an opportunity as well as challenge. It is also alert to the threat of terrorism in Southeast Asia.

As a resident Pacific power and a trading nation, the United States depends on a stable, prosperous Asia. East Asia alone accounts for about one-third of the world's people and one-quarter of global economic output. As Assistant Secretary of Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel reminds us, "[t]he Asia-Pacific region matters for U.S. jobs and U.S. security".²⁰ Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew put what is at stake in even starker terms:

The 21st century will be a contest for supremacy in the Pacific, because that is where the growth will be. That is where the bulk of the economic strength of the globe will come from. If the U.S. does not hold its ground in the Pacific, it cannot be a world leader.

America's core interest requires that it remains the superior power on the Pacific. To give up this position would diminish America's role throughout the world.

The United States' alliances and partnerships play an instrumental role in maintaining its influence in the region. While alliances carry with them a risk of entanglement, this burden is greatly lessened with partnerships. Singapore works quietly and effectively to facilitate U.S. presence through access agreements as well as supporting U.S. embedment in the region's economic and security architecture in formal and informal ways. As a keen and balanced observer of

¹⁸ Matthew Stumpf (2014), "The Singapore-U.S. Strategic Partnership: The global city and the global superpower" in Ashley Tellis, Abraham Denmark and Greg Chaffin (eds), *U.S. alliances and partnerships at the center of global power* (Seattle, WA and Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian research), pp 227-256, p 231.

¹⁹ "China and the world—prospering and progressing together", speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at Central Party School (English translation), September 6, 2012, <http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/speech-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-central-party-school-english-translation>

²⁰ "U.S. Policy Towards East Asia and the Pacific", Daniel Russel, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, remarks at the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs, Washington, D.C., May 29, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/05/226887.htm>

regional developments, Singapore also provides “advice and good counsel” to the United States.²¹

(a) Access agreements and security cooperation²²

After the Philippines’ decision to close Clark and Subic bases, Singapore went against the grain of regional sentiment and signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* in 1990 (“1990 MOU”) allowing the U.S. military use of Singapore’s facilities.

In 1998, it signed an *Addendum to the 1990 MOU*, so that the United States could use the new Changi Naval Base. It is currently the only naval facility in Southeast Asia²³ purpose-built to accommodate an aircraft carrier and was constructed (entirely at Singapore’s cost), despite Singapore having no aircraft carrier of its own. While in theory open to all navies, it is in practice only used by the United States.²⁴

In 2005, Singapore and the United States inked the *Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security* (“2005 SFA”), which serves as a formal framework bringing together existing and future areas of bilateral defense and secu-

urity cooperation. The agreement, the first of its kind with a non-ally since the Cold War,²⁵ expanded the scope of cooperation in areas such as counterterrorism, counter-proliferation, joint military exercises and training, policy dialogues and defense technology.

The 2005 SFA included within it a *Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA)*. This subsumed all defense cooperation activities and provided for new areas of mutually beneficial cooperation, including developing military expertise and defense capabilities to deal with the wider range of non-conventional threats.

Under the auspices of the SFA and DCA, the United States and Singapore set up an annual *Strategic Security Policy Dialogue* to bring together senior defense officials from both countries to exchange views on a wide range of issues, including security, defense, education, trade and the environment. The first dialogue took place in January 2012.²⁶

In mid-2012, Singapore agreed to allow the U.S. Navy to deploy up to four littoral combat ships to the city-state on a rotational basis, citing the 1990 MOU and the 2005 SFA.²⁷

²¹ President Barack Obama, quoted in Megan Slack (2013), “President Obama Meets with Prime Minister Lee of Singapore”, *The White House Blog*, April 2, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/04/02/president-obama-meets-prime-minister-lee-singapore>

²² Unless otherwise noted, the information below is taken from “Factsheet: The Strategic Framework Agreement”, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, July 12, 2005, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/official_releases/nr/2005/jul/12jul05_nr/12jul05_fs.html#.V13wCWQrL_Q

²³ Vietnam has built an international naval and commercial port facility that will reportedly be able to accommodate aircraft carriers: Prashanth Parameswaran (2016), “Vietnam unveils new port facility for foreign warships in Cam Ranh Bay”, *The Diplomat*, March 10, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/vietnam-unveils-new-port-facility-for-foreign-warships-in-cam-ranh-bay/>. In addition, Malaysia’s Port Klang, a commercial port, also has the ability to host aircraft carriers: Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet (2012), “USS George Washington makes first visit to Malaysia”, October 6, <http://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/030063>; Michael Richardson (2001), “Visit is first by foreign warship to new base: Singapore welcomes U.S. aircraft carrier”, *The New York Times*, March 22, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/22/news/22iht-a4_65.html.

²⁴ Email, senior Singapore official, May 30, 2016.

²⁵ Emma Chanlett-Avery (2013), *Singapore: Background and U.S. relations*, Congressional Research Service, July 26, p 3, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS20490.pdf>

²⁶ Apart from bilateral areas of engagement, the dialogue partners also discussed developments in Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and regional institutions; renewed their commitment to the Transpacific Partnership Agreement (TPP); expressed interest in technical assistance for developing countries including in the lower Mekong sub-region; affirmed the importance of freedom of navigation and respect for international law and the peaceful settlement of disputes; and discussed areas of global cooperation. “Joint Statement of the United States-Singapore Strategic Partners Dialogue”, Washington, D.C., January 18, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/181488.htm>

²⁷ “Fact sheet: Deployment of the Littoral Combat Ship to Singapore”, Ministry of Defence, Singapore, last updated on March 12, 2013, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/official_releases/sp/2013/12mar13_speech/12mar13_fs.html#.V14EHmQrL_Q

In 2015, on the 25th anniversary of the 1990 memorandum and the 10th anniversary of 2005 SFA, Singapore and the United States agreed to elevate defense relations through an *Enhanced DCA*.²⁸ They agreed on a broad framework for defense cooperation in five key areas, namely in the military, policy, strategic and technology spheres, as well as cooperation against non-conventional security challenges, such as piracy and transnational terrorism. They also agreed to enhance cooperation in new areas, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cyber defense, and biosecurity. Both countries welcomed the inaugural deployment of U.S. Navy P-8 Poseidon aircraft to Singapore in December “in accordance with the 1990 memorandum and 2005 agreement”.²⁹ The deployment attracted media attention given the P-8’s association with incidents with Chinese forces in the South China Sea.³⁰

Finally, Singapore and the United States enjoy strong military-to-military cooperation, including joint exercises, personnel exchanges and cross-attendance of courses. These exercises build up interoperability between the militaries and facilitate joint operations.³¹

(b) Bolstering economic ties

Singapore also supports the United States’ integration into the region’s economy. China has been rolling out initiatives and frameworks in the Asia-Pacific, such

as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and One Belt One Road. While countries in the region do not expect the United States to match these initiatives, the United States needs to work out what its presence means for the region, particularly for countries that border China and who are not members of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, namely, Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos. In this respect, Singapore welcomes “ASEAN-U.S. Connect”, an initiative announced by President Obama at the U.S.-ASEAN summit in Sunnylands earlier this year, as it will help deepen the United States’ economic ties with Southeast Asian countries.³²

Singapore repeatedly stresses that, for the region, *economics is security*. In 2003, Singapore was the first Asian country to sign a free trade agreement with the United States. The agreement, which came into force a year later, supports the prosperity of both countries. Indeed, the United States has enjoyed a surplus in trade in goods and services since 2001, amounting to \$19.8 billion in 2014. Singapore also holds the second-largest stock of U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Asia and the largest in Southeast Asia.³³ Investment in Asia allows the United States to extend its reach into the region’s growing markets. The United States, additionally, benefits from direct investment from Singapore, which is the fourth-largest foreign direct investor into the United States, after Japan, Australia and South Korea.³⁴

²⁸ “Joint Statement on the 4th United States-Singapore Strategic Partnership Dialogue”, *supra* n 17.

²⁹ “Carter, Singapore Defense Minister sign Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement”, U.S. Department of Defense, December 7, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/633243/carter-singapore-defense-minister-sign-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement>

³⁰ For a discussion of this, see Swee Lean Collin Koh (2015), “Viewing the U.S. Navy’s P-8 deployment to Singapore in perspective”, *Foreign Policy Journal*, December 11, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2015/12/http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2015/12/11/viewing-us-navys-p-8-deployment-singapore-in-perspective/11/viewing-us-navys-p-8-deployment-singapore-in-perspective/>

³¹ “Carter, Singapore Defense Minister sign Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement”, *supra* n 29.

³² “Special ASEAN-U.S. leaders summit working dinner: Regional strategic outlook”, speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Sunnylands, CA, February 2016.

³³ U.S. FDI in Singapore (stock) stood at \$179.8 billion in 2014, almost three times that in China and more than six times that in India.

³⁴ “Singapore and the U.S.: Strategic partners with a unique relationship”, fact sheet, Embassy of the Republic of Singapore, Washington, D.C.; Embassy correspondence dated June 23 and 24, 2016, with updated figures.

Singapore has also been a strong proponent of the TPP, a proposed free trade agreement among 12 Asia-Pacific countries, including the United States.³⁵ It sees the TPP as a “game changer”³⁶ and warns of a loss of U.S. credibility should the TPP fail to be ratified by Congress, especially since many governments in the region have expended political capital pushing for the TPP amongst their own constituents. Failure to ratify the TPP would increase China’s economic and political clout: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes China but excludes the United States, would then likely be the region’s dominant trade agreement. Quite apart from security ramifications of this, “an American failure to ratify TPP would bring about the very thing critics of the trade deal complain about: a more empowered China and bad terms for U.S. goods and services.”³⁷ In contrast, the TPP is projected to increase U.S. exports by around \$120 billion annually by 2025, and create \$80 billion annually in additional income for U.S. workers.³⁸

(c) Facilitating multilateral engagement

Singapore has helped to facilitate the United States’ multilateral engagement with the region through

promoting U.S. ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).³⁹ Given rivalry between intra- and extra-regional powers, ASEAN stands at the heart of any viable security architecture in the region. Greater engagement with the organization increases Washington’s flexibility and influence.

Singapore’s role within ASEAN is particularly important at a time when other founding members of ASEAN are ambivalent about the institution, face serious internal problems, or are in transition.⁴⁰ Further, Singapore’s role within ASEAN is enhanced as the country coordinator till mid-2018 of ASEAN-China dialogue relations. In 2018, Singapore will also take over as the ASEAN Chair.

Observers note that many of the most important initiatives for regional integration involving the United States show “at least some Singaporean fingerprint”⁴¹ Singapore first mooted the idea of a U.S.-ASEAN Summit in 2008, to mark the 30th anniversary of Washington’s formal ties with the regional grouping and also to address the need for a common forum between the top leaders of ASEAN and the United States.⁴² In November 2015, the United States and ASEAN elevated their relationship to a strategic

³⁵ For an overview of the TPP, see Ian Fergusson, Mark McMinimy and Brock Williams (2016), *The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): In brief*, Congressional Research Service, February 9, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44278.pdf>

³⁶ “Statesmen’s Forum: Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore”, *supra* n 2.

³⁷ William McGurn (2016), “Lee Hsien Loong’s American exceptionalism”, *The Wall Street Journal*, March 31, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/lee-hsien-loongs-american-exceptionalism-1459464855>

³⁸ “Statesmen’s Forum: Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore”, *supra* n 2.

³⁹ Stumpf (2014), *supra* n 18, p 241. At Sunnylands in February 2016, Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the importance of U.S.-ASEAN ties:

the US is a very important partner for ASEAN—it is the most important source of technology, of investments, of destination for students seeking education. We cooperate on a wide range of issues such as counter-terrorism and developing human resources. Many ASEAN countries see this as a tremendous plus for ASEAN and a plus also for the stability of the region.

“Special ASEAN-U.S. leaders summit working dinner: Regional strategic outlook”, *supra* n 32.

⁴⁰ Indonesia under President Jokowi does not appear to place much credence on ASEAN; Thailand has been under military rule since 2014 and relations with the United States have become strained; Malaysia’s prime minister is mired in a corruption scandal; the new president of the Philippines is a wild-card and the country, in any event, has rocky relations with China making it a poor intermediary (the Philippines commenced arbitration against China in early 2013 regarding its claims in the South China Sea and China has not forgiven the Philippines for this).

⁴¹ Stumpf, *supra* n 18, p 241.

⁴² Chua Chin Hon (2010), “US, ASEAN to forge strategic ties—New top-level panel will be set up to advise on the breadth and scope of partnership”, *The Sunday Times*, September 19.

partnership. The U.S. president's invitation to ASEAN leaders to Sunnylands was an important symbol of how far U.S.-ASEAN ties have come. Singapore also supported the United States' inclusion in the East Asia Summit, a Southeast Asian-led multilateral gathering, despite China's protestations.

Limits to the U.S.-Singapore partnership

Given similar assessments of the security environment and a shared interest in maintaining U.S. presence in the region, the United States and Singapore enjoy a strong relationship. That said, cooperation between the two countries is not without constraints. Sensitivity to these constraints will help sustain trouble-free relations.

First, Singapore, like many other countries in the region, does not want to be forced to choose between the United States and China.⁴³ While the United States is regarded as the region's security umbrella, China—ASEAN's number one trade partner—is regarded as its rainmaker. Even formal allies of the United States in the region have more to gain if Sino-U.S. relations are cordial.⁴⁴ Further, China is a geographical fact in the region, in a way that the United States is not.⁴⁵ U.S. commitment is therefore something that the region will always, to a certain

extent, be nervous about. Singapore, and almost all other Southeast Asian countries, will simultaneously hedge and balance.⁴⁶ How much of each takes place will depend on demonstrable U.S. commitment and Chinese behavior.

In steering the course of Sino-U.S. relations, the United States must remember first, that the United States and China are so interconnected that that it cannot hold China back without hurting itself, and second, that its ability to manage relations will have an impact on how the region regards the United States' leadership role.

Care must accordingly be taken to avoid unnecessarily provocative words or actions lest nationalist sentiment be inflamed: within the United States, elites are concerned about how China's rise might impact the United States' global influence, while ordinary workers worry about their livelihoods;⁴⁷ in China, many within government circles and outside believe that the United States is trying to keep China down. In respect of the South China Sea, however, the United States must stay its course in conducting regular freedom of navigation (FON) operations as part of the broader FON Program. Such operations are not a "use of force" as China would like the rest of the world to believe, but a legitimate exercise of rights vested under international law. The conduct of FON

⁴³ Singapore Prime Minister Lee stated in 2012:

Our whole region, including Singapore, will be affected by how China-U.S. relations develop. We hope China-U.S. relations flourish, because we are friends of both countries. We do not wish to see their relations deteriorate, or be forced to choose one or the other. Singapore's influence is modest, but we will do what we can to foster good relations, through our statements and actions.

"China and the world—prospering and progressing together", *supra* n 19.

⁴⁴ Lynn Kuok, "Assuring U.S. Allies in the Asia Pacific Involves Better Relations with China", Center for Strategic and International Affairs, <http://cogitasia.com/assuring-u-s-allies-in-the-asia-pacific-involves-better-relations-with-china/>

⁴⁵ In the context of the South China Sea, Singapore's Ambassador Bilahari Kausikan notes, "While the artificial islands are inconsequential in military terms, they are a potent reminder to ASEAN that China is a geographic fact whereas the US presence in the SCS is the consequence of a geopolitical calculation." Kausikan (2016), "Dealing with an ambiguous world", *supra* n 16, p 18.

⁴⁶ Email, senior Singapore official, May 30, 2016.

⁴⁷ "China and the world—prospering and progressing together", *supra* n 19.

operations have taken on an added significance in the South China Sea given China's strategic ambiguity and attempts to assert de facto control.⁴⁸

A second factor that could constrain cooperation between Singapore and the United States is rhetoric, particularly stemming from official circles in the United States, which proves insensitive to ethnic or religious sentiment. Singapore has to be mindful of its multi-ethnic population and that of its neighbors, particularly majority Muslim Malaysia and Indonesia. Cooperation with the United States could be unnecessarily complicated in the event of strong domestic sentiment against U.S.-Singapore ties either within Singapore or within ASEAN and its member states.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The partnership between Singapore and the United States supports U.S. presence in the region. This promotes regional stability and growth, as well as the United States' ability to protect its strategic and economic interests.

Singapore contributes to U.S. engagement in the Asia-Pacific through access agreements and security cooperation, encouraging U.S. economic ties with ASEAN and its member states, and supporting

multilateral engagement. Past and present U.S. administrations have recognized the value of Singapore as a reliable partner, and as a country that punches above its weight in the security, economic and diplomatic realms. The foundations have been laid for further enhancing relations. The onus is now on the next administration to build on it.

Strengthening U.S.-Singapore relations go beyond taking steps directly related to bilateral ties. The United States must also show itself adept at handling relations with China whilst maintaining a strong support for international law; ratify the TPP and cultivate further economic ties with the region; and demonstrate ethnic and religious sensitivity so that Singapore's partnership with the United States does not put it in a difficult position in respect of its own populace or its neighbors.

More broadly, the United States must take early steps to signal sustained commitment to the region. Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, once warned that Asia is not a movie that the United States can freeze and still hope to have influence over: "If the United States wants to substantially affect the strategic evolution of Asia, it cannot come and go."⁵⁰ His advice is particularly pertinent today as the region watches to see if ground sentiment weary of foreign interventions and suspicious of trade translates into an "inflection point" in the United States' approach

⁴⁸ For a discussion of this, see Lynn Kuok (2016), "The U.S. FON Program in the South China Sea: A lawful and necessary response to China's strategic ambiguity", Brookings Institution, East Asia Policy Paper 9, June, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2016/06/07-kuok-fon-south-china-sea/the-us-fon-program-in-the-south-china-sea.pdf>

⁴⁹ Kausikan (2016), "Dealing with an ambiguous world, *supra* n 16, p 4, notes:

The key diversities of Southeast Asia are visceral differences of race, language and religion which define core identities and shape the domestic politics of ASEAN member states. They inevitably colour their calculations of national interest and interstate relations. It is not easy to imagine such primordial factors ever being erased. The potential nexus between the domestic politics of ASEAN member states, intra-ASEAN relations and the interests of external powers in ASEAN is thus a possibility that can never be discounted and must be continually managed.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Allison and Blackwill, *Lee Kuan Yew: The grand master's insights on China, the United States, and the world* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p 28.

to global leadership.⁵¹ ASEAN and its member states are considering how they should position themselves vis-à-vis China and the United States.⁵² The United States must guard against the temptation to withdraw unto itself or see its standing in the world greatly, and possibly irreparably, diminished.

⁵¹ “Statesmen’s Forum: Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore”, *supra* n 2.

⁵² Kausikan (2016), “Dealing with an ambiguous world”, *supra* n 16, p 10.

The Author

Lynn Kuok is a fellow at the Brookings Institution's Center for East Asia Policy Studies, a visiting fellow at the Harvard Law School, and a senior visiting fellow at the Centre for International Law. Kuok's research interests include nationalism, race and religions relations in Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar), and the politics, law and security of the Asia-Pacific region.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any supporter is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment, and the analysis and recommendations of the Institution's scholars are not determined by any donation.