

## How the United States Could Influence Singapore to Counter the PRC

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## **ABSTRACT**

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is leveraging different instruments of power to rewrite the rules-based world order established post World War II. As a result, China's influence grows with close US partners such as Singapore. Due to Singapore's strategic location and position in the Indo-Pacific, it is imperative the United States counters the growing influence of the PRC. By researching existing trade agreements and military cooperation between the US and Singapore, there are several options the United States could pursue and build upon to counter the growing Chinese influence. Reestablishing the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, leveraging foreign military sales, opening bi/multi-lateral INDOPACOM exercise opportunities and linking key aspects of new US doctrine (Agile Combat Employment) with Singapore enhances the political partnership by presenting better alternatives to the PRC China and further isolates the PRC.

The People's Republic of China (PRC), in its effort to rewrite the globally established post-World War II world order, has increasingly sought opportunities to gain political and economic influence. Recognizing this development, the US via its 2018 National Defense Strategy, identified that "mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are crucial to our strategy, providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match."<sup>1</sup> One such example of this alliance is with the Republic of Singapore. While China has made inroads economically with Singapore over the past 35 years, there are still many options for the US to consider. Specifically, the US should consider reentering the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, leverage foreign military sales, open bi/multi-lateral INDOPACOM exercise opportunities and link key aspects of new US doctrine (Agile Combat Employment) with Singapore to enhance their political partnership.

The People's Republic of China and the Republic of Singapore have an extensive diplomatic and economic relationship officially dating back to 3 October 1990. Since then, this bilateral economic relationship "has witnessed rapid and spectacular growth that has been beneficial to the two countries."<sup>2</sup> Over the past three decades, it's estimated that Singapore's "total foreign direct investment has grown...from a tiny S\$60 million to a huge S\$70 billion in 2010."<sup>2</sup> This represents rapid growth in which the two economies have become more integrated with each other.

Additionally, the "portfolio of investment has seen a major diversification, covering almost all the important sectors of the Chinese economy, from traditional sectors like trade and commerce services, industrial parks, real estate, financial services to new emerging areas like education, healthcare and clean energy,"<sup>2</sup> meaning that the

Singaporean economy is even more interwoven with the Chinese economy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) China has been pursuing further amplifies these interconnections, linking markets in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe closer together to form tighter economic cooperation.

The growth of the bilateral economic partnership has also resulted in closer cooperation between the Chinese and Singaporean militaries. In 2019, Singapore, “a longtime U.S. strategic partner, inked an enhanced defense agreement with China in Beijing.”<sup>3</sup> However, the level of cooperation still does not compare to other relationships Singapore has in the INDOPACOM AOR. An impediment to their relationship with China is Singapore’s unofficial relationship with Taiwan. The Singaporeans conduct quarterly and yearly drills with the Taiwanese military in Taiwan. Additionally, the Singaporeans also have training bases on Taiwan as a means to reinforce that military relationship. In an attempt to dissuade Singaporean relations with Taiwan, though, the Chinese have offered to relocate several Singaporean facilities to the island of Hainan, located just off the south coast of China.

Currently, the United States and Singapore are close and cooperative trading partners. According to the Office of the US Trade Representative, the estimated “U.S. goods and services trade with Singapore totaled an estimated \$93.7 billion in 2020. Exports were \$51.6 billion; imports were \$42.1 billion. The U.S. goods and services trade surplus with Singapore was \$9.6 billion in 2020.”<sup>4</sup>

However, an economic instrument of power opportunity the United States could leverage as a way to counter the BRI and reaffirm the US’s leadership in the Pacific theater is to reestablish and rejoin the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement. Singapore

along with the rest of the Alliance of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia and other Pacific Rim countries structured this trade agreement with the help of American leadership and contained measures to reduce trade barriers amongst members that comprised “40 percent of the global economy.”<sup>5</sup> The trade agreement, according to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, would act as “the centerpiece of the United States’ strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>5</sup> It would also “advance broader Asian integration efforts, supporting regional institutions, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum,” ensuring the “United States led the way on global trade rules.”<sup>5</sup>

When President Donald Trump took office, however, he issued an order to pull out from the TPP, leaving the remaining eleven members to restructure a trade deal without the United States known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Beijing took advantage of the opportunity and structured a different trade framework known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which included fifteen Asia-Pacific countries at the exclusion of the United States. The “RCEP creates one of the world’s largest trade blocs, and analysts say its another sign...that countries in the region are moving on without the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

By reentering the TPP, the US would provide alternatives to the BRI by creating avenues of trade and fostering trade agreements in which all parties would be treated fairly. “Rather than directly confront the BRI...the United States must develop compelling alternatives to it. American coordination with Japan and Australian regional infrastructure investment is promising, as are multilateral partnerships (like the Trans-Pacific Partnership that Trump abandoned) that allow Southeast Asian nations to benefit

from US engagement without forsaking Chinese investment.”<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, it is a significant economic move that strategically messages the Biden Administration is committed to our partners in the Pacific.

Like the economic relationship between China and Singapore, the relationship between the US and Singapore has also resulted in a close, cooperative military relationship. The current military cooperation between the United States and the Singaporean is mutually beneficial. According to the State Department, “Singapore is one of the United States’ strongest bilateral partners in Southeast Asia and plays an indispensable role in supporting the region’s security and economic framework.”<sup>7</sup> The US and Singapore currently conduct “\$8.5 billion dollars in active government-government sales cases with Singapore under the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system,”<sup>7</sup> with the F35B, F-15SG, F-16, various air to ground munitions and other weapons, logistics infrastructure and support systems listed as examples. Additionally, over the last six years, the “United States has also authorized the permanent export of over \$37.6 billion in defense articles to Singapore,”<sup>7</sup> such as “aircraft parts and components, gas turbine engines, and military electronics.”<sup>7</sup> Selling the Singaporeans capabilities, such as maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance assets, to help bolster their security in areas such as piracy and international terrorism would further enhance the defense articles and cooperation the United States currently provides. These foreign sales to Singapore not only allows the United States to employ our economic instruments of power, but enables our military instrument of power, and draws Singapore away from the PRC.

In order to increase the military and security cooperation between these two countries even further, the United States government should increase the amount of exercises we conduct with the Singaporean military and security forces, whether bilaterally or part of combined operations to ensure collective security of the Indo-Pacific.

The current exercises that take place with the Singaporeans include Exercise Commando Sling, Exercise Cope Tiger, and they have been invited to participate in Red Flag - Alaska. However, with the establishment of a Singaporean fighter detachment on the US territory of Guam<sup>6</sup>, this opens possibilities of the Singaporeans participating in Guam based exercises such as Cope North to practice interoperability in both Humanitarian Assistance, Disaster Relief (HADR), conduct combined security operations, and large force exercise integration. Exercising and deploying together refines our interoperability with our technologies and tactics and acts as strategic messaging towards the Chinese to reinforce our commitment to our partners who are dedicated to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The United States and Singapore also recently renewed “a key defense pact allowing American forces to use Singapore’s air and naval bases for another 15 years.”<sup>8</sup> This renewal ensures “the access, basing, and over flight [ABO] privileges granted by Singapore advance US government and partner efforts to bolster a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>8</sup> Singapore already supports “rotational deployments of US P-8 aircraft and littoral combat ships,”<sup>9</sup> but the pact creates opportunities to conduct Agile Combat Employment operations to that area of the Pacific. From Singapore, US assets can further deploy to Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia or Indonesia, opening up the aperture of US ABO

to more than just Guam or Japan. The deployment of US assets to Singapore for short but frequent durations of time demonstrates the continued, credible combat capability of the United States military to the region, messages to both the Chinese and our partners our commitment to their security, and further isolates the PRC.

With the Republic of Singapore being a key and vital partner in the INDOPACOM area of responsibility, it is imperative the United States leverages both the economic and military instruments of power to sway Singapore away from closer cooperation with the Chinese. Reentering the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, leveraging foreign military sales, opening bi/multi-lateral INDOPACOM exercise opportunities and linking key aspects of new US doctrine (Agile Combat Employment) with Singapore enhances political partnership that reinforces the US position in theater.



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