

Abstract & Summary

# Risk and Threat Perception in the Indo-Pacific

## Singapore

Nah Liang Tuang



## Abstract

---

Singapore faces unique challenges rooted in its geopolitical position and internal diversity. The nation's leadership and citizens harbor concerns about maintaining relevance in the international community amidst increasing regional tensions. Balancing the competing influences of the United States and China, Singapore's precarious position as a small, vulnerable "sampan" shapes its strategic culture. This entails reliance on US military security and economic prosperity derived from strong ties with China, while navigating a neutral and non-aligned stance.

The city-state also grapples with internal vulnerabilities stemming from its multicultural society, susceptible to external narrative influences and ideological sway from major powers. These dynamics pose challenges to maintaining harmony in its multi-ethnic and multi-lingual population. Through pragmatic strategies, Singapore strives to safeguard its autonomy and stability, ensuring its resilience in a complex and volatile Indo-Pacific environment.

## Summary

---

### Singapore's Key Perceived Security Challenges

#### Balancing US and China Relations

Singapore's leadership often invokes the "sampan" metaphor to emphasize the nation's vulnerability. Former Prime Ministers Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew noted that Singapore, like a sampan, had to have tight social discipline and could not be governed in a liberal fashion like the US due to its smaller size and fragility (the USA likened to an "aircraft carrier"). This analogy highlights the city-state's reliance on stable external conditions for survival, particularly in its relationships with the US and China.

Military ties with the US are robust, with the country hosting "a US Navy (USN) logistics base in Singapore, along with frequent rotational deployments of the USN's warships and aircraft." These ties also include the purchase of advanced defense technology and regular joint military exercises. This relationship has positioned Singapore as a key partner for Washington in Southeast Asia.

In contrast, economic ties with China are significant. In 2023, Singapore imported "critical value-added PRC imports" worth \$24.65 billion, while exporting \$45.75 billion in industrial and manufactured goods to China. "It is evident that Singapore and mainland China share a mutually beneficial economic relationship that both would like to preserve." However, these economic ties are not without risks, particularly as "the PRC's currents have begun to cross with those of the USA."

## Risks of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity

Singapore's diverse population, with 74% ethnic Chinese, can be a vulnerability when it comes to geopolitics. The paper warns that "the official language of the PRC, Mandarin, still has an emotional and cultural hold on the ethnic Chinese population." Many Singaporean Chinese are "receptive to Mandarin-based messaging and soft power from Beijing, which the latter duly exploits." At the same time, American influence is pervasive through "movies, broadcast entertainment, popular culture, tertiary education, cuisine, and even video games." These contrasting influences could create societal divisions, especially during times of geopolitical tension. Singapore's ethnic and cultural make-up predisposes it to soft power pressure from both China and America – and could lead to social unrest.

## Potential Sino-US Conflict Scenarios

In a Taiwan crisis, Singapore's adherence to the "One China" policy and its military cooperation with the US could put it in a difficult position. Similarly, the South China Sea disputes, where China aggressively asserts its claims, could involve Singapore due to its regional ties. Such conflicts could escalate into a situation where Singapore faces pressure to abandon neutrality. Plans of small states can quickly be upset by "realpolitik manoeuvres or violent contestation by the Great Powers." For Singapore, "maintaining balanced policies vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing is important for domestic socio-political stability, and, from the perception of Singapore's ruling party, likely to become more precarious if US-PRC relations deteriorate."

*To substantiate its desire not to unambiguously take either Washington's or Beijing's side in any major Asian dispute, Singapore has refused to officially become either a US or Chinese ally, while not wanting other countries to view it as an ally of either power.*

## Secondary Threats

Secondary concerns like terrorism, climate change, and cybersecurity are chronic but manageable. Singapore's terrorism prevention measures include "specialised military units such as the Army Deployment Force and the Special Operations Task Force." Climate change, while concerning for the low-lying nation, is being addressed through "civil engineering solutions, such as flood control systems and dykes," and regional renewable energy initiatives. Cybersecurity, another prominent issue, is managed by "strong legal frameworks" and "the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, directing IT defense measures."

## Indo-Pacific Approach

### Neutrality and Non-Alignment

Singapore's approach to the Indo-Pacific is rooted in pragmatism and neutrality. The city-state maintains a non-aligned stance to preserve its sovereignty and avoid entanglement in great power rivalries. By carefully balancing its relationships with the United States and China, Singapore seeks to safeguard its

national interests while navigating the increasing tensions in the region. It demonstrates its intent through membership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and by refraining from entering formal alliances with either power.

*This summary is based on the "Singapore" report by Nah Liang Tuang for the KAS project "Risk and Threat Perception in the Indo-Pacific" and was created with the help of generative AI.*