

Risk and Threat Perception in the Indo-Pacific

Singapore

Nah Liang Tuang

Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies



CONTENTS

I. Introduction	3
1.1 Identifying the Key Risks	3
1.1.1 Between Washington and Beijing	3
1.1.2 Diversity is a Vulnerability	5
1.1.3 If and When the Eagle and Dragon Duel	7
1.2 Singapore's Second Order National Concerns	8
1.3 Research Perceptions: Findings and Limitations	10
II. Analysis of Key Security Concerns	12
2.1 Security from the Eagle and Economic Ties with the Dragon	12
2.2 Heterogeneity among Singapore's Chinese Residents as a Weakness?	14
2.3 When the Dragon and Eagle Trade Blows	18
III. Singapore's Stand in a U.S.-China War Scenario	24
3.1 The Geopolitical Nightmare Has Come to Pass, What Now?	24
3.2 Singapore-China and Singapore-U.S. Economic Ties in Times of Strife?	27
3.3 Fighting the Narrative War	29
3.4 What Can or Should Singapore Do?	33
IV. Conclusion	37

SINGAPORE

This paper is entirely the researched opinion of Nah Liang Tuang and does not reflect the official stand of RSIS, NTU or the Singapore Government in any way, shape or form. The author wishes to thank Dr John Kwok, former Research Fellow at RSIS and Co-Founder of Total Heritage Consultancy for crucial intellectual input and the proof reading of this work.

I. Introduction

Singapore was characterized as one of Asia's four tiger economies in the 1980s and the 1990s, and formally recognized for being well managed. It eventually became an emulative model for many developing nations. Yet, the city-state's leadership has never regarded its island republic's future success with assuredness. Leadership figures often perceived Singapore's prospects in uncertain terms.^[1] Although such a guarded outlook might be seen as excessively pessimistic, which is characteristic of the overwhelming discourse on vulnerability in Singapore's strategic culture,^[2] elite concerns over challenges to Singapore's long-term national security are justified.

This tiny island republic is young, having celebrated only 59 years of statehood by 2024. Like other microstates in the international community, its leadership and people fear fading into irrelevance. This study identifies three key issues facing Singapore. The first is Singapore's precarious position in a region that is facing increasing tensions; the second is protecting Singapore's multiculturalism in the face of growing narrative operations from external agencies; and finally, ensuring peaceful living in a multi-racial society such as Singapore. These issues are interrelated. The way ahead is charting a course that considers the talons of the bald eagle, namely, the U.S, and the claws of the dragon, namely, the People's Republic of China (PRC), two powers that have, in recent decades, attempted to shape and influence the geopolitics of Southeast Asia.

1.1 Identifying the Key Risks

1.1.1 Between Washington and Beijing

Former Singapore prime ministers Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew likened Singapore to Sampan^[3] or a small sailing vessel endemic to East Asia. They contrasted the Singapore sample with an aircraft carrier as a metaphor for the U.S. This maritime analogy was used to support the narrative that Singapore had to have tight social discipline and could not be governed in a

[1] Kishore Mahbubani, "Can Singapore survive? (New Updated Edition)," Straits Times Press, December 2021.

[2] Fredie Tan, "The national security thinking of Australia and Singapore," The Forge, November 16, 2020. <https://theforge.defence.gov.au/article/national-security-thinking-australia-and-singapore>

[3] Koh Buck Song, "Sink the old sampan, Spore now a cruise ship," Straits Times, January 27, 2016. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/sink-the-old-sampan-spore-now-a-cruise-ship>

liberal fashion like the U.S., because instability could jeopardize the survival or progress of this small island republic. Conversely, the U.S. could be far less regulated in its internal affairs, since any domestic disruption would not threaten U.S. national continuity. That is, many emergencies could threaten the seaworthiness of a sampan but few could rock an aircraft carrier. As a small nation, Singapore, for example, is vulnerable to environmental forces that may interrupt its course or even bring it to the bottom of the sea—a possibility that Singapore's leadership is keenly aware of.

Correspondingly, nations, like small sailing vessels, serve as a compelling metaphorical rationalization for international security and economic interdependence. Such an analogy implies that a trading or fishing sampan requires pirate-free sailing routes and ports of call unencumbered by war or conflict. An interdependent relationship exists whereby economic seafarers trade port fees and obey the state maritime authority for nautical law enforcement and naval peace preservation, which are elements upheld by the metaphorical aircraft carrier flying the U.S. flag.

Singapore counts on the U.S. as a key security partner, with many mutually beneficial military links^[4], including

- contributing to U.S.-led coalitions against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and counter-piracy efforts off the Horn of Africa;
- purchasing U.S. military equipment since the 1970s worth billions of dollars;
- enabling the training of Republic of Singapore Air Force's (RSAF) personnel by the U.S. Air Force since 1996; and
- hosting a U.S. Navy (USN) logistics base in Singapore, along with frequent rotational deployments of USN warships and aircraft through the former's naval and air bases.

This shows that Washington has geostrategic support from a key member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which allows the former to more easily project military power onto the South China Sea (SCS) and the airspace above it. In return, Singapore receives cutting-edge defense technology and first-rate military training from the world's only hyperpower,^[5] which possibly makes the former among a rather small minority of microstates that can implement a deterrence-based defense policy.

For decades, Singapore and the U.S. have enjoyed these beneficial ties. However, the seas in which Singapore Sampan has been sailing have begun to show signs of riptides. Singapore enjoyed economic ties with the PRC starting as early as the 1980s. In the decades that followed, the mutual financial and business investments between the two nations fostered strong economic ties.

[4] Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. security cooperation with Singapore," U.S. Department of State, April 12, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-singapore/>

[5] "To Paris, U.S. looks like a hyperpower," New York Times, April 2, 1999. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/05/news/to-paris-us-looks-like-a-hyperpower.html>

In the economic domain, Singapore–China ties are significant, contributing to and expanding Singapore’s financial viability. Considering the island republic’s minuscule size, bilateral trade and investment are remarkably substantial.^[6] For 2023, critical value-added PRC imports from Singapore totaled US\$24.65 billion while similar economically/industrially important Chinese exports to Singapore during the same duration were valued at US\$45.75 billion. Bilateral trade mainly consists of value-added manufactured products/capital goods and essential industrial commodities, implying that this economic relationship cannot be easily substituted by other trade competitors. With reference to foreign investment, the PRC invested US\$272.44 million and US\$1.4 billion in Singapore in 2023 and 2022, respectively.^[7] On the latter’s part, it accumulated US\$179.41 billion in investment assets in China from 2013 to 2022.^[8] It is evident that Singapore and mainland China share a mutually beneficial economic relationship that both would like to preserve. However, in recent decades, the PRC’s currents have begun to cross with those of the U.S.

1.1.2 Diversity is a Vulnerability

Having established the pull that both Washington and Beijing exert on Singapore for two paramount pillars of national interest, namely, military security and economic progress, it is pertinent to shift analytical gear and analyze the island state’s multiethnic and multilingual resident population, which can be a critical weakness if either the U.S. or the PRC attempt an influential campaign to sway foreigners to politically support either one.

Notwithstanding the political dominance of the ruling People’s Action Party, which has governed Singapore since its independence in 1965, any government would desire unified support from a critical mass of the population so that independent domestic and foreign policies can be formulated free of foreign interference. Such an ideal paradigm would be threatened if any foreign power were able to manipulate the opinions of voters and/or residents such that the former could exert pressure on the government and/or instigate societal disruptions to coerce local authorities.

Unlike nations such as Japan and Korea, which are blessed with a high degree of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, thereby making it easier for their governments to cultivate and subsequently call on national solidarity to support autonomous policies that may oppose the interests of foreign powers, Singapore has an ethnic and cultural makeup that predisposes it to soft power pressure from both China and the U.S.

Despite being a British colony from 1819 to 1963, unfettered immigration from China throughout the 19th century, and much of the first half of the

[6] Guilia Interesse, “Singapore-China bilateral relations: Trade and investment outlook,” ASEAN Briefing, June 12, 2024. <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/singapore-china-bilateral-relations-trade-and-investment-outlook/>

[7] Tsubasa Suruga, “Singapore’s investment pledges from U.S., China dropped in 2023,” Nikkei Asia, January 30, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Singapore-s-investment-pledges-from-u.s.-china-dropped-in-2023>

[8] “Singapore’s portfolio investment assets in China from 2013 to 2022,” Statista, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/996625/singapore-investment-assets-in-china/>

20th century, led to an ethnic Chinese supermajority in Singapore's population. This was reinforced by a further influx of immigrants from the PRC from around 2005 to the present day, which led to 74% of the current resident population becoming ethnic Chinese.^[9] Even though vernacular Chinese language education was discontinued by 1987 in favor of all schools employing English as a first language of instruction^[10] and English being officially used in parliament, the civil service, large businesses, and the military, the official language of the PRC, Mandarin, still has an emotional and cultural hold on the ethnic Chinese population. Indeed, among Singapore residents who still watch free-to-air TV, the majority (58.1%) prefer to view Mandarin media rather than English entertainment and news channels (33.5%).^[11]

As a result, many ethnically Chinese foreigners, to say nothing of new immigrants from the PRC, are receptive to Mandarin-based messaging and soft power from Beijing, which the latter duly exploits. Examples and instances are explored in Part 2 of this study, along with how even non-voting foreign residents can critically disrupt the social stability required for Singapore to function as an international business hub.

Concerning the U.S. influence on Singapore, this is an entirely different kettle of fish since Washington does not have to take active measures such as co-opting influential locals to champion its policy stances or using active messaging to shape Singapore's views in the desired directions. Indeed, this is unnecessary because swathes of the population already exist across the Chinese majority and Indian as well as indigenous Malay minorities who prefer the U.S. in some way, shape, or form.

Washington had formal relations with Singapore far longer than Beijing, as the U.S. established diplomatic relations in 1965, while official Singapore-China ties only began in 1990. Additionally, U.S. soft power in the form of movies, broadcast entertainment, popular culture, tertiary education, cuisine, and even video games has an undeniably pervasive and effective impact on Asians. As for the linguistic medium of U.S. sociocultural influence, English is the first language of Western-educated Chinese foreigners, is fairly well used among Singapore's Indian and Malay minorities, and is at least functionally understood or vocationally used by those who prefer Mandarin.^[12]

Thus, the U.S. influence on Singapore is welcomed by pro-Western elites and is, at the very least, accepted as a geopolitical reality by the rest of the population. This view of U.S. power and presence was reflected in a 2023 survey by the New York-based Eurasia Group Foundation, which found that 64% of Asians thought the U.S. had a positive influence on Singapore.^[13] This raises the question of how to manage a population that is Asian in nature but Western in character. Ultimately, popular receptivity toward the two

[9] Raudhah Hirschmann, "Resident population in Singapore as of June 2023, by ethnic group," Statista, 2024. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/622748/singapore-resident-population-by-ethnic-group/>

[10] Stephanie Ho, "Vernacular education," National Library Board (Singapore), September 29, 2016. <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuid=715bc06a-0ed3-4fb3-b363-268c87b394ac>

[11] "Free-to-air TV has the widest reach here," Today, November 6, 2015. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/free-air-tv-has-widest-reach-here>

[12] With the discontinuation of ethnic vernacular schools in 1987, all Singaporeans aged 44 or younger have experienced at least 10 years of compulsory education in an English-medium school. The fact that the vast majority of Singaporean youth still study to qualify for a challenging British secondary school certification, the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level exams, means that most working Singaporeans are functionally conversant in and literate in English.

[13] Charissa Yong, "Mixed views in Asia on U.S.'s and China's influence in the region: Poll," The Straits Times, October 2, 2023. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/mixed-views-in-asia-on-us-and-china-s-influence-in-the-region-poll>

most consequential Pacific powers matters because of a likely difference between what the Western-trained policy-making elites and their Western-educated intelligentsia advisors think, and how a substantial chunk of their PRC favoring the electorate will vote in the next elections.

1.1.3 If and When the Eagle and Dragon Duel

Having established that the U.S. and China are important military security and economic partners, respectively, from Singapore's perspective, we can logically understand why Singapore wants to preserve this status quo. As such, it has declaratively maintained a geopolitically neutral stance between these two great powers and has demonstrated its intent by maintaining membership in the international forum for ostensibly neutral states, the Non-Aligned Movement.^[14] 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 U.S. or Chinese ally, while not wanting other countries to view it as an ally of either power.

Regarding Beijing, the city-state has not inked any agreements to provide economic or humanitarian assistance for any kind of PRC to find itself in need. Correspondingly, military cooperation is limited or even cosmetic in nature. A good example of these are counterterrorism exercises (often seen as proverbial "low hanging fruit" in international security cooperation), the last of which was held in 2010, more than 14 years ago.^[15] Concerning the U.S., Singapore has openly emphasized that it is not an American treaty ally, thereby having no formal obligation to provide military assistance to the U.S. under any circumstances, while not expecting that U.S. forces would aid Singapore if the latter were attacked.^[16]

However, the best laid plans of small states can easily be upset by realpolitik maneuvers or violent contestation by the Great Powers. Two hypothetical case scenarios involving conflict between the U.S. and PRC are elaborated in Part 2, but at this point, it should suffice to posit that either side would seek to reinforce legitimacy and bolster political, material, and even military support during a time of conflict. This might well be achieved by encouraging more regional states to join, or at the very least support, a coalition on either Washington's or Beijing's side. Such a possibility may even spiral into an absolutist and partisan ultimatum that leaves no room for neutrality.

As with the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and the Pentagon by Al-Qaeda, the U.S. could tell every East Asian associate nation that it is either "with us or against us."^[17] This neatly divides the region into allies/coalition supporters, who can be counted upon, and adversaries, who must be countered.

[14] "NAM and G77," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore. <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/SINGAPORES-FOREIGN-POLICY/International-Organisations/NAM-and-G77>

[15] Dylan M. H. Loh, "China's rising foreign ministry: Practices and representations of assertive diplomacy," Stanford University Press, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/cae015>

[16] Lan Yun Zhou, "Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong: Close cooperation between Singapore and the U.S. does not mean that Spore will be involved in the US's wars (translated from Chinese)," Lian He Zao Bao (United Morning News), April 10, 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220410122539/https://www.zaobao.com.sg/realtime/Singapore/story20220410-1261418>

[17] George W. Bush, "Address to a joint session of Congress and the American people," The White House Archives, September 20, 2001. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

In this political paradigm, preserving ostensible non-alignment in Singapore has become drastically more difficult. As can be implied from the earlier section 1.1.1. “Between Washington and Beijing,” both the U.S. and PRC have impactful security or economics-based levers, which can serve as carrots or sticks to persuade Singapore to pick a side. Such decisions could have serious domestic political consequences. For instance, the decision to expand participation in more U.S.-led multilateral military exercises might be ignored by the latter during peacetime, but an inked agreement to help repair and maintain U.S. military hardware during any potential war with China might arguably elicit a backlash in subsequent elections. With this in mind, we can see why maintaining balanced policies vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing is important for domestic sociopolitical stability, and, from the perception of Singapore’s ruling party, likely to become more precarious if U.S.–China relations deteriorate.

Whichever path the government eventually takes, it will have to deal with the political proclivities of the various electoral factions whose cultural-linguistic affinities predispose them to favor either China, the U.S., or Western World. The challenge for Singapore’s leadership is to convince the majority that whatever was decided was in the city-state’s sacrosanct national interest while managing any societal disruptions from those who felt that the wrong national route was taken during an acute regional crisis.

The above preliminary analysis shows that i) military security and economic influence connect Singapore with Washington and Beijing, respectively, along with ii) linguistic and cultural characteristics of the city-state’s ethnic Chinese population, which predisposes them to either U.S. or PRC political messaging, and iii) the eventual difficult alignment decision that the island republic’s political elite will have to take when faced with intractable U.S.–China conflict. These are, together, parts of an interlinked tri-faceted national survival paradigm that Singapore might well have to face and surmount in the future. These three interrelated facets present one complex dynamic that has equal importance vis-à-vis one another and comprise Singapore’s primary or principal threat perception matrix. The next section addresses the city-state’s second-order and secondary concerns.

1.2 Singapore’s Second Order National Concerns

This section examines the contemporary and emerging security considerations that are starting to rock Singapore Sampan. However, the Singapore Sampan is used to being rocked from time to time by external elements, such as terrorism, climate change, and cyber security, which will be analyzed, and their second-order importance will be substantiated.

Terrorism is a salient threat of an evergreen nature that crops up from time

to time whenever a regional attack occurs.^[18] Despite extensive coverage in the press and social media, the Singapore government has effectively managed the threat through vigorous enforcement and legal measures, including specialized military units such as the Army Deployment Force^[19] and the Special Operations Task Force, along with domestic investigative agencies such as the Internal Security Department,^[20] which possesses extensive investigative powers. Legally, individuals indoctrinated by terrorist organizations but who have yet to perpetrate attacks can also be detained as a precaution.^[21] Consequently, no terrorist incidents have occurred in Singapore since the hijacking of Singapore Airlines flight SQ117 in 1991 by hijackers claiming to be from the Pakistani People's Party.^[22]

Turning to climate change, Singapore is relatively flat. This is worrisome because of rising global sea levels, which is a chronic but not critical concern for Singapore. Inasmuch as climate change cannot be ignored, it tends to be a global issue that affects all states rather than the city-state. Singapore also employs civil engineering solutions, such as flood control systems and dykes,^[23] akin to what the Dutch have done to keep much of Holland dry, despite much of their nation being below sea level. The government is doing its best to contribute to alleviating climate change by implementing renewable hydroelectric energy from Laos^[24] and solar power from Australia,^[25] along with encouraging the adoption of electric vehicles. Although climate change is a persistent issue, its effects can be mitigated and managed in the short term, whereas long-term solutions have been explored for implementation.

The digital age has led to cyberattacks or cybersecurity becoming prominent objects of national anxiety. This situation is not unique to Singapore. The majority of cyberattacks against Singapore have been commercial fraud or of a criminal nature,^[26] thus making this a local law enforcement issue rather than an external threat to Singapore's sovereignty. In Singapore, cybersecurity and better law enforcement against cybercrime have received government attention. Strong legal frameworks to cope with cybercrime have been introduced,^[27] and the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, directing IT defense measures, has been established.^[28] Thus, similar to terrorism and climate change, this is a chronic problem of secondary rather than primary importance.

In summary, the three aforementioned problems are persistent, manageable, and non-critical issues that flare up periodically. They are easier to remediate from Singapore's perspective than external and internal national security threats arising from the Great Power influence and conflict. As already discussed, measures have already been taken to address these second-order concerns over the long run, making such problems equally relevant among themselves, and thus deserving equitable attention from authorities, which makes comparative ranking or priority unnecessary.

[18] Amir Yusof, "Malaysia arrests 7 people after attack on Johor police post by Jemaah Islamiyah suspect kills 2 cops," Channel News Asia, May 17, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-johor-police-officers-killed-attack-jemaah-islamiyah-4343051>

[19] Jeremy Koh, "SAF to fight terror with rapid response," The Straits Times, July 1, 2016. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/saf-to-fight-terror-with-rapid-response>

[20] Internal Security Department, Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024. <https://www.mha.gov.sg/isd>

[21] Internal Security Act 1960, Singapore Statutes Online, 2020 revised edition. <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/ISA1960>

[22] Choy Choi Kee, "1991 – SQ117 rescue," Ministry of Defense Singapore, March 7, 1999. https://archive.ph/20120805141950/http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/about_us/history/maturing_saf/v03n03_history.html

[23] Sheryl Tian Tong Lee, Selina Xu, and Isabel Kua, "How the tiny island city-state of Singapore fights rising sea levels," Time Magazine, October 10, 2023. <https://time.com/6322111/singapore-fights-rising-sea-levels-climate-change/>

[24] Ng Hong Siang, "Singapore begins importing renewable energy from Laos through Thailand and Malaysia," Channel News Asia, June 23, 2022. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-import-hydropower-renewable-energy-laos-through-thailand-malaysia-2766251>

[25] "Australia approves US\$13.5 billion project to export solar power to Singapore," Channel News Asia, August 21, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/australia-approves-us135-billion-project-export-solar-power-singapore-renewable-energy-4557796>

[26] "Top 9 major cyber attacks in Singapore 2024," FirstCom Academy, August 18, 2023. <https://www.fca.edu.sg/blog/top-major-cyber-attacks-in-singapore/>

[27] "Cybersecurity Act," Cyber Security Agency of Singapore. <https://www.csa.gov.sg/legislation/Cybersecurity-Act>

1.3 Research Perceptions: Findings and Limitations

Official Singapore Government pronouncements or white papers on the three principal issues of this study are absent or scarce. Among the white papers published by Singapore’s authorities in recent years, including those covering topics such as the response to COVID-19 (released in 2023), development of local women (released in 2023), and policies for a healthier population (released in 2022), the author of this study regards none as vital national security or national interest challenges. Instead, based on the cited research for this study as well as other consulted sources, the origins of such sources as well as their frequency are shown in Table 1 below, thus providing a picture of who is cognizant of the three national issues highlighted in this study, or is aware of related/ancillary concepts. The majority of research sources are also quite contemporary, from the 2010s to the present.

Table 1. Overview of type of sources discussing national issues, 2010–present.

RESEARCH SOURCE ORIGIN	FREQUENCY
Former/current Singaporean Senior Civil Servant, Diplomat, Politician, or Government-affiliated Academic	4
Government-controlled or licensed Press	8
Singapore Government Websites	5
Academics from or affiliated with Singaporean Universities	4
Foreign Government Webpages	8
Foreign Press	12
Foreign Scholars/Academics	8
Foreign Research Websites	18

Regarding groups not covered above, public perception in Singapore tends to accept what the government narrates, leading to a lack of critical or evaluative analysis from the general public, specifically foreign policy and defense matters, with the exception of military conscription policies. Indeed, Asians are generally politically apathetic, and such mindsets have been

[28] “The Singapore Cybersecurity Strategy 2021,” Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, 2021. <https://www.csa.gov.sg/docs/default-source/csa/documents/publications/the-singapore-cybersecurity-strategy-2021.pdf>

prevalent since the 1970s.^[29] This could change in the face of sustained and well-implemented information campaigns by foreign powers designed to influence the population.

Local media are largely state-controlled^[30] and have been so since the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act of 1974, which gives the government total control over the circulation of print media.^[31] Hence, the main role of local media is to explain government policies to the general public. Based on the author's personal experience, little critical analysis can be expected. Often, such evaluative articles come from foreign media, particularly from the West. As indicated in Table 1, even if output from senior Singapore government figures and government websites are aggregated together with local media, such sources are outnumbered by coverage from foreign governments, media, and research entities with an online presence (17 vs. 38) by a factor of 1 to 2.23. While not all foreign coverage is analytical or critical in nature, the island republic's authorities view the subject matter of this study as sensitive and would not draw attention to it.

Academic perceptions or perspectives, most of which date from 2016 onward, tend to be from foreign scholars/academics rather than Singapore universities (eight vs. four), but are still comparatively few, which makes this study's analytical coverage relatively fresh and salient. This is especially so because this work explores not only foreign policy and defense matters but also social/ethnic and economic perspectives.

The analysis provided in this paper thus suggests that any PRC information campaign targeted at foreigners can achieve results because of the aforementioned deficit in local and public discussion about foreign policy, national security, or even societal matters. The strongest perceptions and analyses of these issues tend to come from former senior civil servants or government-linked academics within the last five years, who have been chosen as official representatives to push back against the views of the Great Power. In any future contestation of the minds and hearts of voting foreigners, such selective championing may not be sufficient.

[29] Teo Kay Key, "Are Singaporeans really politically apathetic?" Today, April 8, 2021. <https://kyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/publications/details/are-singaporeans-really-politically-apatetic>

[30] "Singapore media guide," BBC News, May 23, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15966553>

[31] "Newspaper and Printing Presses Act 1974," Singapore Statutes Online, 2020 revised edition. <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/NPPA1974>

II. Analysis of Key Security Concerns

2.1 Security from the Eagle and Economic Ties with the Dragon

Having explained the principal foreign policy and domestic challenges to Singapore's national security, it is pertinent to explain how America and China came to feature prominently among the city-states' prime concerns. Simply put, Singapore's military security relationship and economic links with the U.S. and PRC, respectively, are largely outcomes of historical circumstances and the decisions of the city-state's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

The island republic's military history is fairly unique, having British ceremonies and traditions influenced by the presence of British troops over 144 years as a crown colony, and having Israeli military advisors from 1965–1974 to establish the Singapore Armed Forces doctrinal, training, and tactical foundations, which still endure to the present day. The U.S. arguably has had one of the most significant influences on the city-state's national security, being responsible for maintaining stability in Southeast Asia even after its military withdrawal from Vietnam in 1972. Peace and security were assured throughout the Cold War by the U.S. military presence in Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base in the Philippines and U.S. Air Force deployments to Udorn Air Base in Thailand until 1976. Thus, the balance of power against the communist bloc of Asia, including the PRC- and USSR-supported Vietnamese, was maintained by the U.S. military, much to the relief of the ASEAN, of which Singapore was a founding member.

To a similar extent, such a balancing act is still seen in current times with the USN's Freedom of Navigation Operations in the SCS demonstrably pushing against Beijing's "9-Dashed Line" oceanic claim in the SCS and U.S. military rotational deployments through Philippine military installations under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, with the implication that such forces could be readily diverted to respond to any SCS crisis under the auspices of the U.S.–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT).

On the material front, Washington's support was pivotal to building SAF's equipment profile so that the latter could uphold a credible defense for Singapore. Since the mid-1970s,^[32] the former has approved the export of armored vehicles, cutting-edge multi-role combat aircraft,^[33] and both advanced air defense^[34] as well as ground attack precision-guided munitions^[35] necessary to prosecute modern conventional warfare as part of a deterrence-based national defense strategy. Apart from the Air Force training mentioned at the beginning of Part 1, the SAF participates in regular

[32] Emrys Chew, Geoffrey Till, and Joshua Ho (Eds.), "Globalisation and Defence in the Asia Pacific: Arms Across Asia," Routledge, 2009, p. 173.

[33] "Singapore – F-35B Short Take-Off and Vertical Landing (STOVL) aircraft," Defense Science Cooperation Agency News Release, January 9, 2020. https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/singapore_20-06.pdf

[34] "Singapore – AIM-9X Sidewinder missiles," Defense Science Cooperation Agency News Release, April 4, 2013. https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/singapore_13-04_0.pdf

[35] "Singapore – Air-to-ground munitions kits and services," Defense Science Cooperation Agency News Release, February 9, 2023. <https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/Press%20Release%20-%20Singapore%2023-03%20CN.pdf>

bilateral exercises with the U.S. Navy, Army, and Marine Corps,^[36] substantially improving the former's operational competence despite the SAF's lack of combat experience. Such close military ties over nearly five decades have entrenched Washington as a key national security facilitator for Singapore, with the logical inference that it would be extremely difficult to supplement the importance of the former in the latter's foreign policy strategy.

Singapore-China economic ties also have historical roots but began with decisions made by the city-state's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew rather than the paradigm of Cold War rivalries. Based on Lee's memoirs,^[37] amid deeply souring relations between Moscow and Beijing, the latter, from the 1960s, tried to garner support from the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia via propaganda radio broadcasts, thus spreading the message of Chinese communism. Rightly fearing the subversion of their Chinese ethnic minorities into potential rebellious fifth columns, the governments of Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia adopted stances of open hostility vis-à-vis the PRC.

As a sign of his ability to deal with the Communist Party of China(CPC), Lee advised the CPC to cease or tone down these broadcasts. This suggestion was eventually accepted in 1980^[38] after Singapore initiated unofficial relations with the PRC in the latter half of the 1970s.^[39] During subsequent visits to the PRC in the 1980s, Lee was critical of mainland China's economic development efforts and offered to host CPC officials in Singapore for educational/learning stints to develop better economic/industrial policies upon their return home.

While we can never know Lee's true motivations for forging closer Singapore-China ties, or if he ever realized that Singapore might in the future be vulnerable to Chinese economic pressure, it can be posited that he saw himself as a respected statesman and wanted to play the role of the leader who supported and encouraged the paramount leader of China, Deng Xiaoping, to institute reforms that would enable Chinese participation in the international economy, thereby burnishing Lee's legacy as one among a handful of leaders, including then U.S. president Richard Nixon, who facilitated the PRC's political and economic rapprochement with the non-communist world.

Nonetheless, Singapore-China business ties grew dramatically in the following years,^[40] with Singapore becoming China's top ASEAN trading partner by 2002, when bilateral trade reached US\$10.821 billion in 2000 and the PRC became the city-state's sixth largest trade partner. Singapore invested an accumulated US\$159.04 billion in China by June 2000, which then made it the PRC's fifth largest foreign investor. When cross-referencing the Singapore-China bilateral trade and investment figures for 2022 and 2023

[36] Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. security cooperation with Singapore," U.S. Department of State, April 12, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-singapore/>

[37] Lee Kuan Yew, "From Third World to First: the Singapore Story, 1965–2000: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew," Marshall Cavendish (US), 2015.

[38] Edmund Lim, "Looking back on Deng Xiaoping's landmark visit to Singapore," *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/looking-back-on-deng-xiaopings-landmark-visit-to-singapore/>

[39] "Brief introduction to relations between China and Singapore," Xinhua News Agency, May 17, 2002. https://web.archive.org/web/20100307053850/http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-05/17/content_397952.htm

[40] *Ibid.*

given in the first section of Part 1, the island republic would clearly suffer a serious economic shock if trade and investment ties were disrupted, which is an outcome that Singapore's leaders would strive to avoid. This segues into the next section of Part 2: analyzing how Singapore's factious population would react if Singapore–China relations were ever pressured to such an extent that economic ties were interrupted.

For Singapore, both its economic vitality and military security are crucial national interests. It would be exceptionally difficult for the city-state's leaders to be forced to prioritize one over the other due to the drastically worsened U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry. This Great Power conflict would substantially impact Singapore's third critical national interest—social stability or avoidance of domestic turmoil—and is perhaps a fitting and timely analytical coincidence for this paper.

Regarding the risks of the intimate Singapore–U.S. security relationship and extensive Singapore–China economic ties, both are the result of history and, as such, have already occurred, being facts of the island republic's national reality. In Singapore, there is a memorial at the Esplanade Park dedicated to the lives lost in the fight to build a “democratic and non-communist Singapore.”^[41] Clearly, Singapore chose to be on the non-communist side of the Iron Curtain. In choosing a free market orientation during the Cold War, it also established national security links with the U.S., the leader of the Western Bloc. Extensive economic ties with the PRC primarily grew when mainland China was experiencing double-digit rates of economic growth, and most states with finances to spare wanted a share of the burgeoning Chinese market. It was conventional wisdom to expand trade with and invest in China, with Singapore being no exception to this rule. Also, the paramount leaders of the PRC at the time, Deng Xiaoping and his successors until the ascension of the current leader, Xi Jinping in 2012, adopted a relatively benign foreign policy vis-à-vis China's adversaries (such as the U.S.) or foreign states Beijing has an interest in (such as Singapore). Therefore, the city-state's leaders arguably did not perceive any national hazard from U.S. security links and Chinese economic relations until fairly recent times.

2.2 Heterogeneity among Singapore's Chinese Residents as a Weakness?

In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*,^[42] Benedict Anderson posits that nations are socially constructed communities that exist only because their people perceive themselves to be part of an exclusive national group. Regardless of the factual reality, people of various nations see themselves as unique based on shared spoken/written communal language, the commonality of moral/social values, belief in the same future goals, and other aspects of group identity.

[41] Lim Yan Liang, “Marker dedicated to those involved in fight against communism unveiled at Esplanade Park,” *The Straits Times*, December 8, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/marker-dedicated-to-those-involved-in-fight-against-communism-unveiled-at-esplanade-park>

[42] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1991.

In this sense, modern nationalism is a phenomenon that is felt and sustained emotionally, rather than logically derived and thereafter administratively implemented. According to Anderson, despite objective differences between individuals, a belief in national unity makes functional states capable of sacrificing state interests.^[43] Which naturally prompts the question: Do there exist separate or distinct ethnic Chinese “national groups” resident in Singapore? Even though there surely exists a critical mass of people in Singapore who see themselves as exclusively Asians after decades of nation building, this sense of national identity has come under challenge given Singapore’s liberal immigration policy.

Three broad politically and/or socially relevant groups of ethnic Chinese residents in Singapore were identified. The first consists of local-born Chinese foreigners whose families have been residing in the city-state for at least three generations. These people use English as a first language, are comfortable with U.S./Western popular culture, and, in many cases have, attended universities in the West, Australia, or New Zealand. Statistically, this group is the least numerous^[44] but most likely to positively regard the U.S./Collective West, while supporting or at least not opposing the alignment of Singapore’s policies with U.S. interests, if doing so promotes Singapore’s national sustainability.

The second group includes ethnic Chinese who possess Singapore citizenship (the city-state disallows dual citizenship) but whose families have been residents in Singapore for two generations or less. Such a demographic faction comprises those with foreign-born parents (in particular, parents from the PRC), or those who might have been born in mainland China themselves, being naturalized foreigners. Inasmuch as these people may have received English-medium education in Singapore and are thus vocationally functional in English, Mandarin, or to a lesser extent, other Chinese dialects are the emotive tongue of home and mass media consumption. As mentioned in the second section of Part 1, “The Population as a Vulnerability,” this subset of citizens is likely more vulnerable and, for some, more receptive to Mandarin-based messaging or influence operations from Beijing.

Indeed, it is strongly suspected that the CPC in recent years has co-opted a Chinese-born U.S. academic based in Singapore, Huang Jin, to influence local politics and public opinion,^[45] and subsequently convinced a Hong Kong-born naturalized Singaporean, Philip Chan, to promote Beijing’s political interests in Singapore via his public profile and articles in Singapore’s Chinese language press.^[46] Under a law prohibiting foreign influence in Singapore’s politics and society, Huang was expelled from the city-state, while Chan was publicly censured. China spread narratives about Singapore to the effect that the latter^[47]

[43] Ibid, pp. 6-7

[44] Due to its politically sensitive nature, granular census data on Chinese sub-groups in Singapore is not publicly available. Hence, the author has relied on his experience as a native-born Singaporean Chinese academic to make educated deductions about the demographic profile of Chinese residents.

[45] Richard Paddock, “Singapore orders expulsion of American academic,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/05/world/asia/singapore-huang-jing.html>

[46] “Singapore cracks down on Chinese influence,” *The Economist*, February 8, 2024. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/02/08/singapore-cracks-down-on-chinese-influence>

[47] Justin Ong, “Singapore particularly vulnerable yet resilient to Chinese influence operations: French report,” *The Straits Times*, October 5, 2021. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/spore-particularly-vulnerable-yet-resilient-to-chinese-influence-operations>

- is a Chinese nation that is part of and owes allegiance to “Greater China,”
- is a small state that should “know its place” and not alienate the PR
- lost its international standing with the passing of the founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew,
- is too aligned with the U.S. and should stop this policy as America is fading from prominence, even as China is ascending, and
- ought to stay neutral in the SCS dispute.

Although it is difficult to effectively measure the impact of Beijing’s influence operations in Singapore, it is noteworthy that a 2022 poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre recorded 67% of Asians with a positive perception of China.^[48] Similar findings were obtained in a survey conducted by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies during the same year.^[49]

It is uncertain how much of the second group among Chinese Singaporeans has been swayed by the CPC’s propaganda narratives, but the certainty that some have been emotionally “bought over” must be a salient worry for the island republic’s policy makers, because this group may in some ways, and even unknowingly, help to encourage the spread of the PRC narrative indicated in the previous paragraph. It must be said that Singapore’s diverse population does not only extend to citizens who have voting rights. Non-voting permanent residents and expatriate workers can also be sources of externally inspired or instigated social conflicts.

Correspondingly, the third group of Chinese residents in the city-state are PRC nationals legally present for reasons ranging from education to employment and business. This group is presently quite sizeable,^[50] and it is not beyond the bounds of imagination that, in the event of war/conflict between China and the U.S. or any of Washington’s allies such as the Philippines or Taiwan, they would be more receptive to PRC narratives and messages to support their position in any conflict. Such support might take antagonistic forms, such as protests and other types of semi-organized anti-social violence. Considering previous incidents involving mainland Chinese university students in Singapore publishing online content that insulted Singaporeans, local culture, or other ethnic minorities of the city-state in 2011^[51] and 2012,^[52] it might well be unrealistic to expect the large mainland Chinese expatriate community to respect local norms treating societal stability as sacrosanct. There might exist the grievously incorrect perception among this community that the island republic is a “Chinese Country.” It may not even be a huge leap for them to believe that the idea of union with the PRC based on “Chineseness” is a possibility. These perceptions may encourage a psychological or emotive *carte blanche* to act as they please.^[53]

Whether such antisocial activities are directly instigated by Beijing is inconsequential because it would damage Singapore’s societal stability and business confidence. The larger consequence is fanning fissures between

[48] Maria Siow and Joseph Sipalan, “Why do Singapore and Malaysia have a more favourable view of China than the US?” South China Morning Post, July 23, 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3186192/why-do-singapore-and-malaysia-have-more-favourable-view-china-us>

[49] Richard Turcsanyi and Esther Song, “South Koreans have the world’s most negative views of China. Why?” The Diplomat, December 24, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/south-koreans-have-the-worlds-most-negative-views-of-china-why/>

[50] “International migrant stock 2020,” United Nations Population Division. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

[51] Liyana, “Student apologises for video parody of S’poreans,” Yahoo! News, July 26, 2011. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/student-apologises-video-parody-poreans-051024905.html>

[52] Clarence Chen, “S’poreans outraged over PRC scholar’s ‘dog’ comment,” Yahoo! News, February 22, 2012. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/poreans-outraged-over-prc-scholar-dog-072146916.html>

[53] On more than half a dozen different occasions, the writer has spoken to Chinese Singaporeans who have encountered jingoistic PRC military officials and even private citizens, who have expressed nationalist viewpoints asserting mainland Chinese hegemony over Singapore, such that China “owns” Singapore.

those who are pro-PRC and those who are not, tarring the island republic's reputation as a business-friendly oasis in a tumultuous world.

Such a threat would be critically worrying for Singapore's leaders because foreign-inspired communal violence is no stranger to Singapore. In 1984, the Hindu-Sikh riots in India were sparked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, creating tension in Singapore. There were sporadic incidents where Sikhs were assaulted, their properties vandalized, and threatening phone calls were made to Sikh institutions and individuals.^[54] Unfortunately, such intercommunal tensions between adversarial groups of foreign nationals or ethnic groups in the city-state still exist in recent times. During the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir in 2019, tensions between Indians and Pakistanis in Singapore were evident but did not result in any recorded confrontations.^[55] If the territorial dispute between the PRC and the Philippines over the Spratly Islands ever devolves into open violence between their respective militaries and the U.S. gets dragged in due to the U.S.-Philippines MDT, it is extremely uncertain whether the PRC expatriate community in Singapore will wind up in violent incidents against the sizeable Filipino community^[56] (more than 200,000) or even U.S. nationals residing locally^[57] (more than 30,000). Details about the regional scenarios in which Washington and Beijing might end up clashing are presented in the next section.

Regarding the risks of Singapore's heterogeneous ethnic Chinese population being a source of tangible vulnerability, the city-state's resident Chinese demographics are already a present reality, being the result of unfettered immigration into Singapore, especially from the late 19th century to the end of World War II, from southern China, when the former was a British Colony. A second and more significant wave of immigration across China took place from the mid-2000s to the present day as a result of immigration policies to help continue driving Singapore's economic growth. The difference between these two waves of migration lies in the way the Chinese government dealt with them. The first wave of Chinese immigrants that eventually settled in Singapore (as well as across the world) did not come from China but from the Qing Chinese Empire.^[58] This distinction is important because the overseas Chinese "had no concept of belonging to a Chinese nation" until the 19th century.^[59] By the 1990s, and after numerous waves of migration, scholars had identified four types of overseas Chinese across the world. Broadly speaking, the four groups are^[60]

- overseas Chinese who identify with China and its development, continue to maintain political ties with China, and are a minority;
- overseas Chinese who identify as being ethnically Chinese but focused on building a new life in their host country, and are often a majority;
- overseas Chinese who participate in the politics of their host country, and contribute to nation-building efforts even if their loyalty may be questioned; and

[54] "Religious fervour that goes overboard," *The New Paper*, December 30, 1989, p. 10. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/newpaper19891230-1.2.14.1?qt=sikh,%20hindu,%20gandhi,%20singapore&q=sikh%20hindu%20gandhi%20singapore>

[55] Sherlyn Seah and Daryl Choo, "Kashmir conflict: Indians, Pakistanis living in Spore worry for family, friends back home," *Today*, March 1, 2019. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/kashmir-border-conflict-indians-and-pakistanis-living-singapore-worry-family-and-friends>

[56] "Stock estimate of overseas Filipinos," Commission on Filipinos Overseas, December 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190623000052/https://cfo.gov.ph/images/stories/pdf/StockEstimate2013.pdf>

[57] Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. relations with Singapore," U.S. Department of State, October 1, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-singapore/>

[58] Goh Sui Noi, "Being Chinese overseas," *The Straits Times*, July 12, 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/being-chinese-overseas>

[59] *Ibid.*

[60] Gungwu Wang, "Greater China and the Chinese overseas," *The China Quarterly* 136 (1993): 926-48. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231747906_Greater_China_and_the_Chinese_Overseas

- overseas Chinese who have assimilated into the nation and do not want to be identified as Chinese.

The Chinese who left China before the 1990s did not form monolithic communities with overseas Chinese people in their host countries. What this group has in common is that they came from a China that had been isolationist (late Ming dynasty and Qing Chinese Empire period), weak, and humiliated (late Qing dynasty and China under Kuomintang rule), and in a period of rebuilding (up to the 1970s). This was a time period that the PRC describes as China's "century of humiliation."^[61] Those who left the shores of China during this period were regarded as having abandoned their motherland.

The second wave of Chinese immigration post-1990s was very different. They came from all parts of China and their families were shaped by the events and policies of Mao, Deng, and China's capitalist transformation. China projects confidence and progress, and positions itself as a regional power. Those who left China during this period may have done so for reasons similar to those of their brethren many decades earlier, such as displacement, economic opportunity, or privileged connections, but their attitudes were vastly different. They tended to increase the numbers that comprised the first two groups, as described earlier. They may even have pushed those who migrated earlier into the third and fourth groups, creating more tension between newcomers and established communities. In a 2022 assessment of China's diaspora policy under Xi Jinping in Germany, all Chinese nationals residing abroad, including those holding foreign citizenship, are "understood by Beijing as belonging to China... regarding all people of Chinese descent as Chinese irrespective of their nationality."^[62] It appears that Beijing may be tapping into the first group of overseas Chinese to continue to identify with China. On the one hand, Beijing aims to use this group to win, or at the very least gain, influence over other groups of overseas Chinese. On the other hand, it appeals to nationalist emotions to help strengthen the motherland through activities such as intelligence gathering, technology transfer, disseminating PRC narratives, and covertly recruiting ethnic Chinese residents who could influence policies in the host country.^[63] As mentioned earlier, Singapore dealt with two individuals who were part of Xi Jinping's Chinese diaspora policy. It is thus an ongoing fact that persuasive information operations toward Singapore's Chinese citizens are being conducted by Beijing, just as the island republic's population is indirectly influenced by U.S. soft power.

2.3 When the Dragon and Eagle Trade Blows

The potential turmoil threatening Singapore's social cohesion is real. It becomes a great concern if we turn to geostrategic scenarios involving drastic

[61] Alison Kaufman, "The century of humiliation and China's national narratives," Testimony before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 10, 2011. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf>

[62] Carsten Schäfer, "China's diaspora policy under Xi Jinping," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 9, 2022. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022RP10/#fn-d24964e2236>

[63] Ibid.

deterioration in U.S.–China relations involving conflict and war, which would threaten Singapore’s longstanding position on multi-racialism and the maintenance of an ostensibly non-aligned diplomatic posture between the Eagle and the Dragon. In drastically polarizing situations, Singapore Sampan may face the question of balancing its national interests against foreign and domestic political consequences.

The **first hypothetical scenario** involves the escalation of tension in East Asia. The PRC views Taiwan or the Republic of China (ROC) as an unfinished business from the 1949 Civil War and that the island would eventually return to the motherland. However, the use of force to achieve this goal cannot be ruled out. After a significant, socially obvious, and enduring economic recession^[64] that unfortunately triggers widespread protests against high unemployment in key mainland China cities, tensions with the ROC flare after Taipei signs several agreements with Latin American and European nations to promote closer economic and social relations. With the intention of demonstrating firm leadership while guiding the population during an acute economic crisis, the Chinese President describes Taipei’s latest moves as “dangerously separatist.” Thus, the PRC implements a naval “quarantine” preventing the passage of all military goods to Taiwan, and ramps up flights of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF)^[65] into Taiwan’s airspace. In one particularly unfortunate incident, the interception of PLAAF planes by Taiwanese aircraft results in casualties. This provides the *casus belli* for Beijing to declare a “Legitimate National Reunification Campaign” to regain control of Taiwan. The former initiates military action against the latter’s political and military command infrastructure.

Although the Taiwan Relations Act does not obligate Washington to deploy military forces to defend the ROC, there is strong bipartisan support for Taiwan in Washington, and hence, a gravely concerned U.S. President authorizes two USN carrier battlegroups to sail to the Taiwan Straits in order to persuade mainland China to revert to the pre-conflict status quo in order to prevent a further escalation of conflict. However, tragically, the events already in motion may not be stopped, as the PRC steadfastly adheres to its strategic objective of reclaiming Taiwan, since backing down might incur the loss of domestic political legitimacy. Regrettably, the Chinese military attempts to tactically dissuade the USN by launching missiles against the USN once it is within range. Unfortunately, one of these missiles manages to breach a battle group’s missile defense, causing significant casualties.

At this point, it would be pertinent to conduct inferential analysis on where Singapore might eventually stand regarding the scenario about Taiwan, since crisis issues involving the ROC arguably have a more certain route to conflict given Beijing’s comparatively more hardline declarative stance vis-à-vis Taiwan, versus the multilateral contestation over the SCS.

[64] “New data spells bad news for China’s economy,” DW News, August 16, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_ieVtf18DM

[65] The PLAAF is the PRC’s air force.

In an interview on May 8, 2023, shortly before he became Singapore's Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong sidestepped the interviewer's question about whether Singapore would enforce sanctions against the PRC if mainland China invaded Taiwan. He instead pointed out adherence to the "One China" policy where Taiwan's "de jure" or legal independence is not openly recognized, and expressed the hope that all participants in the China-Taiwan dispute be cognizant of all risks and "red lines" so that the status quo can be preserved.^[66] This approach emphasizes the desire for stability between the PRC and ROC, along with the intention not to get involved in any future conflict between Beijing and Washington. It is emblematic of Singapore's foreign policy, involving the maintenance of a rules-based world system and seeking non-antagonistic outcomes in times of crisis. Beyond the official views of the island republic, a deeper analysis of Singapore-Taiwan relations is required. This would offer an educated guess to understand what would happen to Singapore Sampan if the Dragon and Eagle started to duel over Taiwan.

At first glance, Taiwan and Singapore are substantially similar, sharing southern Chinese cultural practices (the vast majority of Chinese immigrated to Singapore until the end of the 20th century from Southern China), linguistic commonality (Fujianese dialect being spoken widely among older Taiwanese and Singapore Chinese, while the youth of both states are fairly well exposed to U.S. entertainment media), and a non-socialist commercial orientation. This has led to close and friendly relations. However, ever since the 1990s, unofficial relations between Singapore and Taipei, due to the aforementioned "One China" policy, reinforced by the former's desire to benefit from the PRC's then rapidly burgeoning economy.

Despite serious bilateral trade integration between the PRC and Singapore, which supersedes Singapore-Taiwan trade, pro-Taiwan policy stances carry significant momentum during times of crisis. Even as economic sustainability is undeniably important, national/military security is of paramount national interest, and Singapore recognizes that Taipei has rendered invaluable assistance to its military. Specifically, personnel from Taiwan trained the SAF in the 1970s and 80s,^[67] and the ROC allocated land for land-scarce Singapore to conduct unilateral army training from 1975 to the present.^[68] This implies that a special strategic relationship exists between Taipei and Singapore that, at least on an elite leadership level, is closer than the official bilateral relationship between Beijing and Singapore.

In the event of open hostilities between the Dragon and the Eagle, Singapore's national interests may lead it to choose the "lesser of two evils," support a pro-U.S. coalition, and ride out inevitable economic punitive measures applied by the PRC on the city-state in response. This has some precedence. In one of the clearest demonstrations of the PRC's displeasure over continued Singapore-Taiwan military ties, Hong Kong port authorities

[66] Lily LaMattina, "Singapore's new prime minister says Taiwan cannot be compared to Ukraine," Taiwan News, May 16, 2024. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/5688266>

[67] Ja Ian Chong, "Singapore and Taiwan's multifaceted, unofficial ties," The News Lens, November 22, 2022. <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/176948>

[68] I-wei Jennifer Chang, "Taiwan's military ties to Singapore targeted by China," Global Taiwan Institute, May 6, 2020. <https://globaltaiwan.org/2020/05/taiwans-military-ties-to-singapore-targeted-by-china/>

in November 2016, at the behest of Beijing, seized nine armored vehicles of the Singapore Army that were previously deployed for a training exercise in Taiwan and were being returned to Singapore.^[69] This soured the relationship with the city-state, and if this was intended to have been a lasting message, the island republic's leaders have quite certainly not forgotten this incident.

The **second fictional scenario** involves the escalation of conflict between the PRC and the Philippines in the SCS. China claims all of the SCS, even based on historical and maritime archaeological arguments, where ancient Chinese maps and shipwrecks have been used as proof to claim Chinese historic passage and the use of the seas by Chinese mariners since time immemorial.^[70] In modern times, parts of the SCS are also occupied by the overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of nations such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In particular, the Philippines is currently enforcing claims using the islands and reefs in its EEZ as bases and outposts. It has recently become the target of the PRC Coast Guard, which has employed aggressive tactics on the Filipino Coast Guard Forces,^[71] even as the latter were carrying out legitimate duties in the Philippines' EEZ^[72] off the West Philippine Sea (WPS).^[73]

Because of recent events, the sitting Filipino President is under increasing pressure to be more assertive against the PRC Coast Guard. Consequently, he feels compelled to authorize the deployment of the most capable vessels of the Philippine Navy to these contested seas to escort their lesser armed/unarmed coast guards or chartered civilian vessels. He is also well aware that there exists a treaty that would compel the U.S. to defend his country in times of war. This scenario may lead the Dragon into a duel against the Eagle over the SCS.

Unfortunately, Beijing is determined to reinforce its claims to the SCS or WPS to secure its bountiful oil and natural gas reserves, ensure its industrial and economic development, and hedge against possible economic stagnation. Using Chinese historical arguments would make it even more difficult for China to back down from any incident as it would be seen by its citizens as a loss of pride, reminding them of what China experienced in its "century of humiliation." The regrettable cycle of escalation continues, culminating in a standoff near a disputed reef where heated emotions overcome attempts at de-escalation. A physical encounter between a PRC Coast Guard vessel and a Philippine Navy patrol vessel results in significant damage on both sides and loss of life.

This crosses a red line that neither side can politically tolerate and starts to fuel patriotic emotions at home. The President of the Philippines activates the U.S.–Philippines MDT, which assures that "an armed attack on the Philippines armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft in the South China Sea

[69] Ibid.

[70] "Historical records 100 percent support China's claims in the South China Sea,' says British scholar," Global Times, April 16, 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202404/1310685.shtml>

[71] Agence France-Presse, "Chinese sailors wield knives, axe in disputed Sea clash with Philippines," Voice of America, June 20, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-sailors-wield-knives-axe-in-disputed-sea-clash-with-philippines-7663194.html>

[72] According to the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea, a state's EEZ extends 200 nautical miles from its coastline, where it has exclusive rights to all economic resources.

[73] The WPS is referred to as the South China Sea by other nations. China claims most of the WPS as its sovereign waters, despite such a claim being debunked by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague in 2016.

would invoke U.S. mutual defense commitments.^[74] This triggers a response in the form of a USN task force supplemented by two Marine Expeditionary Units^[75] to the SCS and WPS territories controlled by Manila, originally as a show of force and solidarity with its ally. However, even as tensions appear to stabilize in the days that follow, patriotic voices start to drown out other calls for calm and de-escalation. To make a point, a portion of China's fishing militia fleet sail dangerously close to the USN task force. The crisis takes an inexplicable turn for the worse when warning shots appear to damage and injure several militia fleet crew members. The garrison force at a nearby PRC-controlled island monitoring radio waves feel that they have to intervene and launch a missile against U.S. logistics based on Filipino soil. Consequently, significant casualties are reported among U.S. service personnel and Filipino civilian employees working at the base.

Both of the aforementioned scenarios are fictional, but are based on the experience of past events and likely trajectories if future events enter into an unrecoverable tailspin. Such realities are possible, as follows: The events leading to a possible uncontrollable escalation of hostilities are beginning to be seen in i) the increasing PRC military presence in the areas around Taiwan, ii) more belligerent Chinese actions against the Philippines in the SCS/WPS, and iii) an economic outlook for mainland China that may force it to divert its citizens' attention elsewhere to preserve the CPC's power. Instances of economic degradation leading to authoritarian regimes resorting to military adventurism to distract an increasingly disaffected local population have occurred repeatedly in the past. One particularly prominent case was Argentinian dictator Leopoldo Galtieri, who invaded the British Falkland Islands in April 1982 to rally nationalistic sentiment among Argentinians in the face of a failing economy. The applicability of such a scenario to CPC cannot be ruled out conclusively.

The commonality between these scenarios is that the U.S. is unavoidably involved due to treaty obligations^[76] and suffers sudden losses because the sitting White House administration comes under overwhelming bipartisan pressure from both the U.S. Congress and the Senate to act. It does so by first marshaling backing from allies, leading to the formation of a supportive coalition that may include appealing to states that are still "fence-sitting." As mentioned earlier, the U.S. has the option of using coercive levers, such as the denial of military hardware/software exports to Singapore, along with rescinding military training agreements, which would seriously handicap the island's defense capabilities. These levers may offer Singapore very little room for maneuvering. Simultaneously, China would surely try to sway Singapore away from U.S. influence by using economic levers—the proverbial carrot and stick. How the city-state might respond and any hypothetical domestic or foreign outcomes are explored in Part 3 of this paper.

[74] Sebastian Strangio, "Kamala Harris says US commitment to Philippines 'unwavering,'" *The Diplomat*, November 22, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/kamala-harris-says-us-commitment-to-philippines-unwavering/>

[75] A Marine Expeditionary Unit is an expeditionary United States Marine Corps battalion reinforced with aviation and logistics units. It comprises 2,200–4,400 personnel.

[76] There is precedent to support such scenarios, as it was treaty obligations that turned the assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Hungary into the First World War.

When viewed through the lens of international relations, the risk of a China–Taiwan or China–Philippines crisis, which subsequently escalates uncontrollably into a U.S.–China conflict because of treaty obligations, is nonzero and concretely probable. Such contingencies should not be dismissed, and Singapore’s security planners must actively consider such scenarios. Washington may even seek to avoid combat involvement as it struggles under the obligations of the Taiwan Relations Act or the U.S.–Philippines MDT. It is worth noting that World War I started with a political assassination that triggered the activation of numerous interlinked defensive treaties, drawing most European nations into a bloody four-year war. If one death precipitates World War II, numerous politically significant fatalities will certainly activate the ironclad clauses of defensive treaties, making an Asia Pacific conflict likely.

III. Singapore’s Stand in a U.S.–China War Scenario

3.1 The Geopolitical Nightmare Has Come to Pass, What Now?

A state of war between a regional Great Power and an extra-regional superpower catches Singapore between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” To begin with, analyzing Washington’s coercive potential in the military security realm should induce a fair amount of caution among the island state’s defense planners. From a cursory examination of the SAF’s equipment holdings, the following weapons/equipment are U.S.-made (Table 2), requiring regular supplies of U.S. spare parts for maintenance, without which they will be significantly handicapped or become inactive. More technically advanced equipment, such as aircraft, might require software upgrades and passwords supplied by their U.S. manufacturers to remain up-to-date or even be used, respectively.

Table 2. U.S.-made SAF equipment holdings

EQUIPMENT DESIGNATION/NAME	MILITARY BRANCH DEPLOYED	OPERATIONAL PURPOSE
Mk 44 Bushmaster II 30mm and M242 Bushmaster 25mm Automatic Cannons	Army	Chief armament for armored troop transport vehicles
Various diesel engines from Detroit Diesel, Caterpillar Inc., and Cummins.	Army	Engines for all the Army’s self-propelled artillery and the majority of the Army’s armored troop transports, amphibious armored vehicles, and Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles
M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System	Army	Singapore’s sole self-propelled Multiple Launch Rocket System
XM395 Precision Guided 120mm Mortar Munition	Army	The only GPS-guided mortar shell in the Army’s inventory
AN/TPQ-53, AN/TPQ-36 & AN/TPQ-37 radars	Army	Radars for locating enemy artillery forming a substantial quantity of the Army’s capability
F-15E Strike Eagle	Air Force	Air Superiority and Deep Strike fighter jet
F-16 Fighting Falcon	Air Force	Multi-Role Combat Jet
F-35 Lightning II	Air Force	Multi-Role Stealth Jet
Gulfstream G550	Air Force	U.S. business jet fitted with Israeli Airborne Early Warning & Control radar

KC-130 & C-130 Hercules	Air Force	The former is an aerial refueling tanker & the latter is a transport aircraft (large chunks of the Air Force's tanker and transport fleets)
AH-64 Apache	Air Force	Sole attack helicopter
CH-47 Chinook	Air Force	Heavy lift transport helicopter
SH-60 Seahawk	Air Force	Anti-Submarine Warfare helicopter (the AH-64, CH-47 and SH-60 comprise the majority of the helicopter fleet)
AIM-120 AMRAAM, AIM-9 Sidewinder and AIM-7 Sparrow	Air Force	Medium ranged Air-to Air Missile (AAM), short-ranged AAM and older model medium-ranged AAM, respectively. These are the majority of the Air Force's AAM stocks.
Paveway II	Air Force	Freefall laser-guided bomb (U.S. is the sole supplier of such munitions for Singapore)
Joint Direct Attack Munition	Air Force	GPS guided freefall bomb (U.S. is the sole supplier of such munitions for Singapore)
AGM-65 Maverick Missile	Air Force	Guided air-launched, rocket-powered, multi-purpose surface attack missile
BGM-71 & AGM-114 Missiles	Air Force	Guided helicopter launched anti-tank missiles
CH-47 Chinook	Air Force	Heavy lift transport helicopter
AGM-154 Joint Standoff Weapon	Air Force	Long range air launched guided glide bomb (helicopter fleet)
AGM-84 Harpoon	Air Force and Navy	Only jet guided anti-ship missile in the Air Force's and Navy's inventory
Lockheed Martin AN/FPS-117	Air Force	One of only two advanced Air Search & Defense radars acquired by the RSAF

Due to Singapore's miniscule size and smaller population vis-à-vis its putative adversaries, the SAF's planners have decided that the city-state's military defense strategy must be grounded in diplomacy and deterrence to prevent war; however, if the latter were unavoidable, a swift and decisive victory must be the priority.^[77] While it is debatable which of SAF's air, land, or sea branches is most responsible for deterrence or achieving an expeditious victory, the U.S. military embargo would seriously hobble the city-state's military doctrine.

Specifically, the Army's mechanized or armored infantry units^[78] would find it much harder to outmaneuver and defeat the enemy if the worn-out U.S.-made engines of their armored troop vehicles could not be overhauled, and/or the automatic cannons arming these vehicles are rendered inoperable due to a lack of spare parts for maintenance. Moreover, the ground forces of

[77] Singapore Ministry of Defense. <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/home>

[78] Mechanized or armored infantry are ground troops transported in vehicles to and from the battlefield so as to maximize tactical mobility, thus covering more area/distance.

the city-state depend on U.S. approval for shipments of rocket launcher spare parts, rocket munitions, precision-guided mortar shells, and radar components to track adversary artillery. If deterrence should prove ephemeral, such arms are essential for accurate long- and short-range strikes on critical targets, whereas radars are vital for suppressing enemy artillery so that Singapore's forces can be preserved.

Next, the Air Force depends on U.S.-made equipment for a lion's share of its hardware. As shown in Table 2, the RSAF's multi-role combat aircraft, early warning radar-equipped jets, aerial refueling and transport aircraft, and attack and anti-submarine warfare helicopters, together with much of the heavy lift helicopter fleet of the RSAF, were purchased from the U.S.

Additionally, the absolute majority of the Air Force's precision-guided missiles and bombs for targets in the air, on land, and at sea are U.S. products. The U.S. is one of the only two nations (along with Israel) that supplies advanced ground-based air defense radars to Singapore. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the defense of the island republic's airspace, as well as the operational effectiveness of Singapore's Army and Navy as an outcome of being enhanced through timely air support from the RSAF, to say nothing of the latter's autonomous strike capability on strategic targets, depends on good relations with Washington.

Finally, an examination of the Republic of Singapore Navy's (RSN) hardware holdings reveals that it is perhaps the least vulnerable to the deprivation of U.S. spare parts and weapons. Indeed, the only major weapon or system that the RSN bought from the U.S. was the AGM-84 Harpoon anti-ship missile. However, the harpoon missile is the only weapon available to the RSN to prosecute enemy vessels beyond the visual range. While the Navy could purchase a competing model of anti-ship missiles from another nation that would be compatible with the RSN's European-designed or built ships and submarines, deliveries of this replacement missile would take time and require training for personnel to build operational competence with this new missile. The result of U.S. equipment sanctions is also a window of acute vulnerability from when the last Harpoon is fired to when the first RSN vessel is operationally certified on replacement missiles.

An indirect concern is that all the Navy's ships, submarines, Western weapons, and supporting systems are either built or designed by states that are either allied with or susceptible to Washington's influence, such as NATO members and Israel. If the former so desired, it could pressure the latter to withhold naval equipment exports and software upgrades from Singapore. Consequently, the RSN's ability to deter maritime adventurism from adversary states, secure the island republic's Sea Lanes of Communications, and support amphibious operations by the Army would definitely be jeopardized.

Having clarified that military material deprivation would have a debilitating effect on Singapore's deterrence potential, and the ability to prevent a drawn-out war should violence be unavoidable, it is also worth reiterating that downgraded Singapore-U.S. ties would preclude training of the SAF by the U.S. military and scupper future exercises with the latter. For the city-state's military, this inability to benchmark itself against the military of a supportive superpower would stymie operational readiness. It would hence be exceedingly difficult for Singapore to turn down Washington if a "with us or against us" ultimatum was ever issued. However, it is prudent to analyze Beijing's likely coercive economic influence on the former to holistically infer the island republic's decisions in such a strategically tense situation.

Examining the risk of Washington severing military ties with Singapore requires the creation of educated guesses and assumptions. For reasons that are covered in the next section, it is unlikely that the city-state will side with Beijing; therefore, the SAF will not be completely deprived of its US-supplied defense capabilities. However, the extent to which Washington will support or facilitate the island republic's military security will depend on the practical and political backing Singapore gives America in a U.S.-China conflict. Full and open backing from the former to the latter will, of course, preserve the status quo in military partnerships with the U.S., while partial or reserved backing either on the political or actionable/material front might mean withholding spare parts for certain weapon systems, denial of upgrading already possessed equipment, canceling approvals for arms purchases, and other painful but not crippling penalties.

3.2 Singapore-China and Singapore-U.S. Economic Ties in Times of Strife?

If Singapore were induced to support a pro-U.S. coalition due to the city-state's reliance on Washington's military-based support, it would be remiss of Beijing to not attempt to convince the island republic's leadership to reverse the course and maintain some form of nominal non-alignment akin to Singapore's pre-conflict political stance, thus rebuffing the Americans to some extent.

Based on the previous analyses in Parts 1 and 2, this can be achieved chiefly via economic methods. First, the PRC has a very significant economic relationship with Singapore, which is true in absolute terms. According to the latest statistics for 2023, Singapore-China bilateral trade amounted to US\$124.42 billion^[79] of which Chinese exports totaled US\$76.95 billion,^[80] and the corresponding aggregate Singaporean exports were valued at US\$47.47 billion. This compares realistically with the trade statistics from 2022 where the city-state exported US\$53.1 billion to the PRC and the latter exported US\$50.8 billion in return.^[81] Referencing foreign investment, the

[79] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023," Department of Statistics Singapore. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade>

[80] "China exports to Singapore," Trading Economics, 2024. <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/singapore>

[81] "Singapore (SGP) and China (CHN) trade," The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/sgp/partner/chn>

balance changes as mainland China's accumulated direct investment as of 2022 amounted to US\$6.3 billion^[82] versus aggregate Singapore investment into the PRC of US\$179.41 billion by the same year, as mentioned in Part 1 of this paper.

If the PRC decides to express displeasure over Singapore taking Washington's side or even appearing to exhibit pro-U.S. favoritism in any U.S.–China conflict, the city-state's leaders should be cognizant of the economic pressure levers that China could apply. In terms of impact, two of the most implementable would be trade restrictions amounting to de facto sanctions such as high tariffs on Singapore's products/services and even boycotts of Singapore's exports. Taking the average of the figures from 2023 and 2022 mentioned above, it would, at worst, lead to a trade revenue reduction of approximately US\$50 billion that year. As for imports from China, the island republic buys significant quantities of valuable capital products such as broadcasting equipment, computers, office machine parts, and even merchant ships along with essential commodities such as refined petroleum.^[83] Finding alternative national suppliers for these imports would take time, and a decision by Beijing to limit/prohibit exports to Singapore would inhibit the productivity of the latter's economy since an annual average of about US\$63 billion (average of previously quoted import values from 2022 and 2023) is imported from China. Such action is not inconceivable since the PRC has implemented such "self-limiting" trade decisions before.^[84] In terms of trade, a coercive power imbalance favors Beijing. While China is Singapore's most valued trading partner,^[85] Singapore is the PRC's 16th largest trading partner,^[86] based on data from 2023. This gives Beijing the option to implement trade sanctions against Singapore without any significant economic harm.

Turning to foreign investment, this provides an avenue for eroding Singapore's gross national product, part of which includes yields and returns from Singapore's investments overseas. As stated earlier, the city-state invested US\$179.41 billion into China while only receiving US\$6.3 billion in Chinese investment as of 2022. Hypothetically, Singapore's investment holdings in the PRC could be nationalized or confiscated as a punitive measure. If the island republic adopted a retaliatory approach with Chinese investment in Singapore, the appropriated assets would not be sufficient to compensate for the city-state's seized assets.

On a purely quantitative basis, the economic pain inflicted on Singapore's economy, if Beijing decides to use trade and investment as an economic stick to penalize Singapore's foreign policy decisions, makes a convincing argument against supporting the U.S. However, further analysis reveals a more complicated strategic picture that could lead to choosing the proverbial "lesser of two evils." Examining Singapore's trade statistics for 2023 reveals that, while China is the former's largest trading partner, the U.S.

[82] Arendse Huld, "The rise of Chinese capital: Impact on ASEAN's manufacturing landscape," ASEAN Briefing, November 21, 2023. <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/the-rise-of-chinese-capital-impact-on-aseans-manufacturing-landscape/>

[83] "Singapore (SGP) and China (CHN) trade," The Observatory of Economic Complexity. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/sgp/partner/chn>

[84] Gatra Priyandita, "Chinese economic coercion in Southeast Asia: Balancing carrots and sticks, Hybrid CoE Working Papers," The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, October 2023, pp. 1–31, 16.

[85] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023," Department of Statistics Singapore. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade>

[86] "National data," National Bureau of Statistics of China, January 12, 2024. <http://guangzhou.customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxgk/2799825/302274/302275/5624373/index.html>

is the second largest with US\$96.19 billion.^[87] Even though drastic disruptions to 13.85% of the island republic's total trade (Singapore-China trade as a percentage of total foreign trade amounting to about US\$908.67 billion) could trigger a recession, rebuffing, or even give an angry Washington a lukewarm response, it might not be a smart move because the rest of the city-state's major trading partners include U.S. allies such as the European Union (US\$78.46 billion), South Korea (US\$46.34 billion), and Japan (US\$40.53 billion), who can be pressured into economically ostracizing a Singapore that has chosen to "cast its lot" with an adversary of the U.S.^[88]

Turning to foreign investment, the U.S. has much greater sway over Singapore than China does. With over US\$244 billion cumulatively invested in Singapore as of 2019,^[89] the local business community and, by extension, the Singapore Government cannot afford to (figuratively and literally) offend Washington. As for the existence of any debt hesitancy to offend Beijing, Singapore does not owe China any debts, and hence, there is no "debt trap diplomacy" on which the PRC can lean. Additionally, the city-state is not part of the Belt and Road Initiative and has not accepted any Chinese loans or grants to build infrastructure. Thus, Beijing has no financial obligation that could hinder its geostrategic autonomy.

Even without considering the weighty U.S. contribution to Singapore's national security and the facilitation of its strongly proactive military doctrine, the city-state is quite likely to bite the proverbial bullet and bear the economic consequences of a China that may feel that it has been offended either when Singapore appears to be supporting a pro-U.S. coalition or maintaining its position of multi-racialism while supporting a rules-based order. If the U.S. supplied arms, equipment, training, and knowledge transfers were factored into Singapore's political considerations, the eventual geopolitical decision would be even clearer.

Singapore is likely to support a pro-U.S. coalition in some practical or actionable terms, especially if the coalition's efforts resonate with Singapore's foreign policy. It can be posited that the risk of the PRC economic penalties outlined in the earlier paragraphs is very high or almost certain. However, depending on Singapore's political support for the aforementioned Washington-led coalition, Beijing might offer the island republic the chance to recover the latter's foreign investments or be compensated for their nationalization, in order to tempt the city-state to weaken its coalition contributions.

3.3 Fighting the Narrative War

There is an oft-quoted saying by Lord Palmerston, the British Prime Minister

[87] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023." Department of Statistics Singapore. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade>

[88] Singapore's bilateral trade with Hong Kong (about US\$53 billion) strengthens China's coercive hand as the PRC controls Hong Kong. However, further research from <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/sgp/partner/hkg> reveals that the majority of imports from the latter consists of gold, precious metals, and jewelry, which are luxury products that are not economically vital, and hence, easily substitutable or sourced elsewhere. Conversely, the lion's share of exports to Hong Kong are integrated circuits, which are a valuable industrial product which is readily saleable to alternative markets should the CPC direct Hong Kong to boycott Singaporean products. For these reasons, Hong Kong will not be considered in this paper's analysis.

[89] Danielle Issac, "Foreign direct investments from the US to Singapore hit over \$244b," Singapore Business Review, 2019. <https://sbr.com.sg/economy/exclusive/foreign-direct-investments-us-singapore-hit-over-244b>

from 1855–1858 and 1859–1865, that “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”^[90] If Singapore ever decides to, in its own way, support the U.S. in any U.S.–China conflict, it is because it is in its calculated national interest to do so. Be that as it may, it is almost certain that Beijing will not put itself in Singapore’s proverbial shoes to understand why the latter has decided to align closer with Washington. Instead, as earlier mentioned, the PRC is quite likely to react with righteous indignation that a “Chinese Country” peopled by the Chinese diaspora, which should rightly owe allegiance to the concept of a “Greater China,” has inconceivably decided to “betray” the former in favor of a foreign Western enemy (in this case America). Thus, the city-state may need to be humbled in order to teach it to “know its place.”

Other than the weighty economic penalties mentioned in the previous section, there is most certainly going to be official, semi-official, and/or Beijing-sanctioned but ostensibly unofficial condemnation of Singapore’s decision and its leadership. Official censuring of the city-state’s foreign policy not to turn down the U.S. could be issued by the PRC’s foreign ministry along the lines of the former making a “grave mistake,” which would ultimately “jeopardize its long-term interests.” Such measured criticism might grow in intensity when CPC-controlled media/news outlets such as the China Global Television Network and Xinhua News Agency air or carry current affairs reports and editorials denouncing the Singapore government for aiding the American Eagle. Possible examples of such strongly disparaging and even subtly threatening content are as follows:^[91]

- “The island republic has no business in this conflict, and thus has no moral right to take sides against China.”
- “Singapore is a very small country, thus opposing a Great Power like the PRC would be foolish.”
- “China has a long memory. Are Singapore’s leaders sure that they want to walk down this treacherous path?”

If messaging was not sufficiently clear, ultra-nationalist bloggers or social media influencers could be given official *carte blanche* to castigate Singapore’s leadership. Indeed, this was done previously when Lu Qi, a PRC nationalist scholar labelled Singapore’s founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew a *hanjian* or traitor to the Chinese Nation because Lee deemphasized a Chinese “national” or cultural identity for Singapore’s Chinese diaspora,^[92] thereby weakening the influence that Beijing had over Singapore. In the same vein, other mainland Chinese nationalists have labeled Lee as an “opportunist” who exploited both the PRC and U.S. for his own ends. If Lee could be lambasted for his domestic and foreign policies during peacetime, an incensed Beijing would most certainly endorse the far harsher castigation of the city-state’s sitting prime minister during wartime.

[90] Susan Ratcliffe (Ed.), “Oxford Essential Quotations (4th Edition),” Oxford University Press, 2016. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00008130>

[91] The first two comments are paraphrased narratives that mainland China has previously expressed about Singapore. The third comment is derived from the content of an article written by former Singaporean Ambassador, Bilahari Kausikan in *The Straits Times* on May 30, 2019. All three are sourced from Mr Kausikan’s book, *Singapore Is Still Not an Island*, Straits Times Press, 2023, pp. 154, 258.

[92] Rachel Lu, “Was Lee Kuan Yew an inspiration or a race traitor? Chinese can’t agree,” *China File*, March 25, 2015. <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/media/was-lee-kuan-yew-inspiration-or-race-traitor-chinese-cant-agree>

However, criticism, no matter how virulent it is, does not accomplish anything to hurt Singapore or change the policies of its leaders. Indeed, it is widely understood that sovereign states, to say nothing of Great Powers such as the PRC, would surely enunciate opposition to the external policies that counter their national objectives. Instead, the Chinese opposition to Singapore's support for the U.S. would be directed at Singapore voters who are predisposed toward China due to cultural, socio-political, and even linguistic affinities. The idea is to communicate with such a voting bloc and impart ideas, such as

- the government of the day is acting against the interests of the "Greater Chinese People" (of whom the CPC claims to be the legitimate government);
- Beijing will refuse to work with such an adversarial government; and
- since the CPC will continue to govern the PRC whatever the outcome of the U.S.-China conflict, while U.S. policies change with subsequent administrations, Singaporeans should pressure their government to change course, or vote more China-friendly government in the next elections, so as to restore Singapore-China relations to "what it should and used to be."

Such a strategy to meddle in the internal politics of a sovereign state is not new to mainland China's foreign affairs playbook. A good example of this was during the 2018 Malaysian general elections when the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia openly campaigned for the President of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), an ethnic Chinese political party that was then part of Malaysia's ruling National Front or Barisan Nasional coalition.^[93] That the MCA president subsequently lost his parliamentary seat is beside the point, since the PRC ambassador's behavior was forbidden under Article 41 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of non-interference by diplomats in the internal affairs of their host countries.^[94] Furthermore, in 2015, the previous mainland Chinese ambassador said, in relation to the potential anti-ethnic Chinese mob violence in Malaysia, that the PRC would take action against members of the Chinese diaspora. This was accompanied by a speech days later where he emphasized that all foreigners of Chinese ethnicity were free to regard the PRC as "their home."^[95] Taken holistically, the CPC's track record indicates that it is likely to regard ethnic Chinese Asians as falling under its influence or even moral authority, which negatively affects Singapore's decision-making autonomy and sovereignty.

Actual PRC nationals present in Singapore during a U.S.-China war, where Singapore supports, or even appears to support, a pro-Washington coalition in the eyes of the Chinese Dragon, is a serious concern. As covered in Part 2 of this paper, this group is quite large and is estimated to be hundreds of thousands. Taking an estimate of approximately 500,000 mainland Chinese citizens present in Singapore, and factoring in the "rally 'round the flag effect," where citizens of a nation naturally support the state and its leaders

[93] Bilahari Kausikan, "Singapore is still not an island," Straits Times Press, 2023, pp. 142-143.

[94] "Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations," United Nations, 1961, p. 13. https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/9_1_1961.pdf

[95] Bilahari Kausikan, "Singapore is still not an island," Straits Times Press, 2023, p. 143.

when at war,^[96] creates a truly worrying potential threat.

Regardless of the efficacy of CPC propaganda to inspire loyalty to the PRC, and with no means to actually gauge how patriotic mainland Chinese nationals in Singapore really are, it would be prudent for Singapore security planners to assume that the “rally ‘round the flag effect” for PRC citizens when hostilities against the U.S. have commenced would lead to at least a proportion of PRC residents in Singapore being willing to undertake activities against Singapore (since it is supporting the U.S.) and the U.S. presence in the island republic. Even with a conservative estimate that only 10% of mainland Chinese citizens in Singapore are willing to bid for the CPC, this still gives rise to a worrying pool of 50,000 adversary agents who might do the following:

- Attempt a general strike or cause serious labor disruptions. Mainland Chinese citizens are employed in a wide range of blue and white-collar professions. They have a concerning ability to disrupt or even temporarily cripple business operations.
- Cause mass social disturbance. This possibility was mentioned earlier in Part 2, where the spectrum of violence against the sizeable Filipino or significant U.S. community is mentioned. What was not said was the inevitable harsh and strict police actions that would inevitably follow, somewhere shattering Singapore’s peaceful image.
- Sabotaging infrastructure and facilities. As explained above, PRC citizens are involved in a wide variety of industries, including managerial, rank, and file staff. In the initial phases of a U.S.–China war, such individuals could sabotage Singaporean infrastructure/facilities to hinder the city-state’s ability to support the U.S. or punish the former’s government for daring to go against the “Greater Chinese Nation.” A sobering thought is that such saboteurs might even be naturalized Singapore citizens who were born in China and remained loyal to the PRC, despite years of living in Singapore.
- Espionage of U.S. military operations in Singapore. The island republics U.S. aircraft, warships, and even a USN logistics base. During wartime, U.S. military operations in Singapore would surely increase exponentially, and it would be remiss for Beijing not to appeal to PRC citizens to spy on U.S. military movements in Singapore. Such espionage operations are expected until they are firmly dealt with by Singapore and U.S. counterspying efforts.

While influence operations to convert Singapore voters toward pro-mainland Chinese viewpoints are a medium- to long-term affair, the disruptive, destructive, and espionage-based actions of the nationalist CPC supporting local PRC nationals are an immediate concern, especially when Singapore is further drawn into the vortex of conflict between the metaphorical Dragon and Eagle.

[96] Joshua Goldstein and Jon Pevenhouse, “International Relations (8th Edition),” Pearson Longman (New York), 2008.

Based on this paper's analysis thus far, Singapore's national interest justifies the decision to join or support a U.S.-helmed coalition that would place the city-state near a certain risk of being subjected to a PRC-launched manipulative informational campaign targeting local voters. Unfortunately, the risk that such a campaign will actually achieve any pro-Beijing political or electoral objective is unpredictable and unknown. Concerning the risk of CPC-instigated disruption, sabotage, and/or espionage activities on Singapore soil, an educated guess would reckon that espionage is almost certain to occur given its direct non-destructive nature. However, the extent to which Chinese covert agents will foment economic/social disruption and sabotage operations will inversely depend on the priority that the PRC places on normalizing Singapore-China relations after the conclusion of U.S.-China hostilities.

3.4 What Can or Should Singapore Do?

To maintain decisional autonomy in its foreign policy, Singapore should diversify its military equipment suppliers and national security facilitators while broadening its trade and investment partners to avoid being beholden to any particular Great Power or superpower. This is sound advice in theory but does not play out well in practice.

All decisions are compromised when building military capabilities. Singapore could, in principle, diversify its sources of military hardware across several national manufacturers, but this would substantially raise the costs of the defense capabilities that the island's republic desires to maintain. The reason for this is the lack of economies of scale from concentrating defense acquisitions on one or a few select companies from one nation (e.g., the U.S.) to regional state grouping (e.g., the European Union). Buying a critical mass of equipment from a unitary source allows Singapore to negotiate better prices, terms, and conditions such as technology transfer, which would not be offered with smaller piecemeal acquisitions. The city-state has already spent a hefty US\$15 billion on the military for 2024^[97] (For context, Türkiye had a comparable US\$15.8 billion budget in 2023^[98]). Further increases owing to inefficiencies in hardware acquisition would be contentious. Additionally, defense imports from diversified sources would make logistical coordination for SAF far more challenging than it needs to be, thereby eroding military operational readiness, especially if any one supplier suffers manufacturing or shipping delays.

Next, the quality and reputation of the armaments are issues. With military security as the lynchpin behind territorial integrity and sovereignty, Singapore cannot afford to have potential adversaries cast aspersions on SAF equipment, which would weaken the deterrence projection. The SAF must employ high-grade arms backed by excellent maintenance and upgrading

[97] "Singapore sets USD15 billion defence budget for 2024," Janes, February 19, 2024. <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/industry/singapore-sets-usd15-billion-defence-budget-for-2024>

[98] Nan Tian, Diego Lopes Da Silva, Xiao Liang, and Lorenzo Scarazzato, "Trends in world military expenditure, 2023," SIPRI, April 2024. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf#page=2

agreements. The largest arms exporters by revenue are the U.S., France, Russia, China, and Germany, ranked in decreasing order,^[99] and the island republic cannot consider Russia (due to international sanctions and poor equipment performance in Ukraine) and China (concerns about quality^[100] and vulnerability to Chinese geopolitical leverage) as defense suppliers; Washington, Paris, and Berlin are already major arms purveyors to Singapore. Hence, factoring in the reputation and established quality of U.S. and European weapons, along with the need for economies of scale with manageable logistics, it is perhaps unavoidable that the U.S., and to a lesser extent, the European Union, will have military supply leverage over Singapore.

Examining economic considerations, other than mainland China, the other fourth largest bilateral trading partners by gross trading revenue (in Singapore Dollars) are as shown below:^[101]

- 2nd United States (\$129.1 billion)
- 3rd Malaysia (\$123.6 billion)
- 4th EU (\$105.3 billion)
- 5th Taiwan (\$92.9 billion)

Thus, Singapore's key trading partners consist of developed economies and its closest immediate neighbor, Malaysia, which is a fellow ASEAN member that Singapore depends on for essential imports, such as food products. Hence, Singapore already has an economically ideal mix of trading partners, and it is counterproductive and inefficient to seek further trade diversification. For better or worse, the city-state's trade vulnerability to external coercion is unavoidable.

Parsing the island's major foreign investors, the top three foreign investors are the U.S., Japan, and the United Kingdom—developed economies and leaders of the Global West, on which Singapore's economy depends for investments in corporate finance and equities, the wholesale/retail sector, and manufacturing industries.^[102] Realistically, a policy that broadens foreign investment donors to lessen the influence of vulnerability yields limited utility. The list of affluent countries with surplus funds to invest externally is short, and if Singapore has to potentially support the national interests of key foreign investors to maintain cordial economic relations, it would be preferable if the latter states were members of a rule-based liberal international order that abides by UN conventions, resolutions, and essential principles.

Having established that it is both difficult and impractical to mitigate Singapore's military and economic vulnerability to external pressures, the remaining option is to reinforce domestic resilience to mainland Chinese propaganda and persuasive informational operations. Returning to the analysis from Part 2, where the work of Benedict Anderson referring to national

[99] Katharina Buchholz, "The world's biggest arms exporters," Statista, March 13, 2024. <https://www.statista.com/chart/18417/global-weapons-exports/>

[100] "China's arms exports face sharp decline due to defective quality, unreliable performance: Analysts," The Times of India, September 13, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/chinas-arms-exports-face-sharp-decline-due-to-defective-quality-unreliable-performance-analysts/articleshow/103619727.cms>

[101] "Merchandise trade performance with major trading partners, 2023," Department of Statistics Singapore. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/modules/infographics/singapore-international-trade>

[102] "Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Singapore," Lloyds Bank, July 2024. <https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/singapore/investment>

identity being socially constructed and emotionally sustained within the common consciousness of the people was discussed, the challenge is to ascertain how Singapore can create a localized national identity that can achieve subscription or “buy in” from an absolute majority of Singaporean voters, along with at least a simple majority of ethnic Chinese Singaporeans.

Such an identity or sense of nationalistic belonging can be rooted in any number of factors, including common language (i.e., Singlish or Singapore English, which is the English patois spoken by all local-born or raised residents), cuisine, an abstract sense of belonging to the territory of Singapore, or even values such as multiculturalism, common moral ethics codes, and the belief that Singapore has value and must be fought for. In essence, this majority-supported national identity serves as an effective bulwark against Beijing’s persuasive or directional propaganda because it unambiguously establishes the following:

- Singaporeans are our own people, even if ethnic Chinese do not belong in a “Greater China.”
- Singapore implements policies that serve its own national interests, even if the Great Powers (such as the PRC) find them objectional.
- The city-state will manage its international relations and stances toward regional/global disputes according to its strategy for survival and progress. The CPC does not get to dictate our policies.

Unfortunately, the common English saying “easier said than done” applies to any endeavor to build an enduring national identity, taking much time and well thought out/carefully implemented social policy.

More resources should be invested in areas such as heritage education and the promotion of successful local sports personalities, along with other areas that contribute to strengthening the fabric of society. Such a national project is a long-term effort and regrettably leaves Singapore vulnerable in the short- to medium-term, as it usually takes one or two generations for shifts in national identity to take place. Such a process cannot be rushed but should be encouraged at the very least.

Finally, the issue of PRC nationals present in Singapore after the U.S.–China hostilities commenced is perhaps the least civil or cordial to address. Indeed, any strike action/labor unrest, violence, sabotage, or spying carried out by this group will most probably be harshly dealt with by the island republic’s police and even specially trained military units enforcing Singapore’s infamously strict laws. A possible permanent solution is for this community to be sent back en masse to China in return for the compulsory wholesale repatriation of all foreigners present on Chinese soil or PRC-controlled territories at that time. There is historical precedence for this in that civilian exchange programs were previously conducted during wartime, when civilians caught on the wrong side of the border were safely repatriated to their home countries. In this case, PRC citizens can be assured

that there is a way back home, while foreigners in China also desire to return to their city-state.

IV. Conclusion

For many reasons, Singapore is fortunate. Simply put, its geostrategic position as an indispensable international port, the unstinting hard work of its population, the wise economic and foreign policies of its government, and the geopolitical outcomes in Asia writ-large, which have so far precluded a major war since the 1980s, have allowed the small island's republic to thrive.

However, as the analysis in this paper has shown, Singapore's sustainability becomes contentious once the two most significant powers in Asia, the U.S. and PRC, are drawn into a prolonged period of tension that may escalate to open conflict. In this scenario, the city-state does not want to countenance as it challenges Singapore's successful and long-standing position on multi-racialism and respect for a rules-based order, putting the city-state in a difficult position where it may have to choose a different way forward. Washington's preponderant influence over Singapore, as its chief arms supplier and military readiness facilitator, along with the U.S.'s position as Singapore's top foreign investor and second-largest trading partner, leads to the deduction that the island republic may have to choose to bear the painful loss of very substantial trade with, and sizeable accumulated investments in, the PRC. In this case, the preservation of military/national security is worthy of the high likelihood of a serious economic recession. Such cold calculus in service of the national interest during a crisis would be an unenviable task for the sitting Singapore government.

Even if the relationship between the U.S. and the PRC settles into a persistent tension like that of the Cold War, the city-state's leaders would still have to grapple with the potential shift in public support from ethnic Chinese voters who hold favorable views about Beijing for linguistic, cultural, or other sociopolitical reasons. It is a foregone conclusion that the CPC would try to get such a voting bloc on its side using influence operations. The city-state has been governed by the same ruling party since independence, and its policies on promoting and defending multiculturalism and multi-racialism have been an anchor for stability and economic progress in Singapore. A change in government leadership and a change motivated by external forces would be significant. Economic disruption, social and security-based upheaval, violence, and sabotage from PRC nationals acting under direct and indirect inducement from the PRC threaten Singapore, which was built after independence in 1965. Beijing potentially or realistically has such influence over foreigners, and the peaceful functioning of the island republic should be a critical concern for any current and future government.

However, as with all problems, even the aforementioned national migraines for Singapore policymakers have solutions, albeit those that are challenging, require a long implementation horizon, or are harsh. These are difficult sustained efforts to foster a consciously perceived Singapore national identity that is free from foreign influence and successfully inoculates the population against foreign influence operations. Such a societal project could take decades and run the risk of policy-based fatigue. The cost of not seeing it through is the potential risk of being manipulated by foreign state actors against Singapore's best interests.