

# A decade of uncertainty: what impact will the security environment in the South China Sea have on Singapore over the next 10 years?

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## Abstract

This paper examines the impact that the security environment in the South China Sea will have on Singapore over the next ten years. It contends that maritime disputes across the region have intensified in recent decades to the point where the risk of future armed conflicts has increased dramatically, and that the South China Sea will likely be plagued by increasing tensions over territorial claims, complicated by ambiguities over US strategic policy towards Asia.

To sustain regional peace and security, the paper argues that Singapore should explore new partnerships with like-minded middle powers to advance a shared security agenda, which could include a role in mediating heightened competition between the US and China. It also argues that Singapore is well positioned to assist in the expansion of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea initiative, and facilitate the conduct of joint exercises to enhance overall stability in the region.

## Introduction

The ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea are a serious threat to regional security and stability. Over recent decades, maritime disputes across that region have intensified to the point where the risk of future armed conflicts has increased dramatically.<sup>1</sup> Despite international disapproval of its large-scale reclamation works and construction of artificial islands in the disputed areas, China has remained defiant and embarked on the installation of weapons and military-length airstrips on several of these islands. In response, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has warned:

We're going to have to send China a clear signal that, first, the island-building stops and, second, your access to those islands also is not going to be allowed.<sup>2</sup>

Such instabilities will impact Singapore's open and outward-oriented economy, which relies on strong trade ties with the US, China and Southeast Asian countries. If left unchecked, territorial disputes could spiral into a full-blown maritime conflict and affect Singapore's diplomatic relations and economy. In view of the heightened regional tensions, how should the city-state navigate through the uncertainties, and sustain strong ties to protect its economic interests and promote peace in the region?

This paper will argue that the security environment in the South China Sea over the next decade will be plagued by increasing tension over territorial claims, complicated by ambiguities over US strategic policy towards Asia. This will impact on Singapore. To sustain regional peace and security, Singapore should explore new partnerships with like-minded middle powers to advance a shared security agenda.<sup>3</sup> To mitigate against unintended maritime incidents in the disputed waters, Singapore should also contribute towards the implementation of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and propose expansions to the procedures.<sup>4</sup>

## China's strategic fortifications

Since 2013, China's reclamation works and construction of artificial islands in the disputed areas have progressed at astonishing speed, creating some 2000 acres of landmass on Chinese-occupied reefs (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> In June 2015, China announced the near completion of reclamation work and commencement of critical facilities construction on the artificial islands.<sup>6</sup> Based on analysis of satellite pictures released by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative in December 2016, these installations appear to be surface-to-air defence systems equipped with anti-aircraft and anti-missile capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

Several military-length airstrips have also been built on these islands, which could support the forward deployment of fighters. The militarisation of these islands has provided China with the strategic depth it has long sought, and

the capability to enforce its interests several hundred miles south of mainland China.<sup>8</sup> It is a concept that focuses on defence-in-depth beyond the nation's boundary, explained by M. Taylor Fravel as:

[P]ushing the first line [of defence] away from China's borders and coasts to ensure that combat occurs beyond China's homeland territory, not on or within it. In this way, China's borders and coasts are now viewed as interior lines in a conflict, not exterior ones.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 1:** Disputed areas in the South China Sea, within China's so-called 'nine-dash claim'<sup>10</sup>

## Failed diplomacy and flashpoints

Predictably, China has repeatedly refused to submit to the scrutiny of international law fora that would curtail its expansion of strategic influence beyond its shores. The US also failed to seize the opportunity and put pressure on China when the Permanent Court of Arbitration Tribunal in The Hague in June 2016 ruled in favour of the Philippines in its case against China's claim of the disputed areas. Instead, the Obama administration encouraged both China and the Philippines to resolve the matter themselves. Then US Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters that:

[The US was not interested in] fanning the flames of conflict, but rather trying to encourage the parties to resolve their disputes and claims through the legal process and diplomacy.<sup>11</sup>

This inaction may have driven the Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte to subsequently embrace China and condemn the US. The US and the region's disjointed (and often divergent) approaches in confronting China's fortification of the artificial islands have continued to embolden China and nullify any concerted diplomatic solution to Beijing's assertiveness over the disputed territories.<sup>12</sup> China

has managed to divide ASEAN and prevent multilateral approaches from making any substantive headway in the disputes.<sup>13</sup> The failure in 2012 by ASEAN states to agree on a code of conduct for the South China Sea, as well as their inability to reach consensus on a joint communique in June 2016, reflected this.<sup>14</sup>

The fragility of the security situation in the region has been highlighted by a series of flashpoints involving China and some other claimant states, as well as the US. In 2012, for example, China clashed in a lengthy maritime standoff with the Philippines, each accusing the other of intrusions in the vicinity of Scarborough Shoal. Multiple collisions between Vietnamese and Chinese ships also occurred when China introduced a drilling rig into the waters near the Paracel Islands in May 2014.<sup>15</sup> In December 2016, the seizure of a US drone by a Chinese submarine was another incident that exemplified the power struggle and contest of naval supremacy in the region.<sup>16</sup>

The US Navy resumed so-called freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in October 2015 to contest China's growing naval power, despite warnings from China's Foreign Ministry that Washington should not challenge China's sovereignty in the disputed region.<sup>17</sup> Soon after the inauguration of President Trump in January 2017, the USS *Carl Vinson* began patrolling the disputed waters, seemingly demonstrating the firm commitment of his administration to challenge China's domination of the artificial islands.<sup>18</sup> Strategic competition between the US and China will be heightened by the further conduct of FONOPs, especially within 12 nautical miles of the weaponised islands.

## The impact on Singapore

Singapore, with a surface area of approximately 700 square kilometres, and a lack of arable land and natural resources, is heavily dependent on trade and commerce. The prosperity of the city-state has grown due to its strategic geography, strong governance, social cohesion, a relatively stable region and strong international ties with friendly nations. As a global hub of free trade, finance and transportation, Singapore's primary revenues come from transportation, travel and financial services with Asian countries.<sup>19</sup>

These factors have intensified the economic interdependence of Asian countries and are a key stimulus to booming economies in the Asia-Pacific region. Economic forums and institutions formed to foster a stable environment have also contributed to regional security. Hence, any escalation of conflict or disruption to the security equilibrium in the region will stifle Singapore's economy and lead to increased unemployment, social upheaval and place greater pressure on the ruling government.

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Situated between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and near the Strait of Malacca, Singapore is Asia's major petrochemical-refining centre and key oil-trading hub (see Figure 2 below). Singapore's maritime industry contributes approximately 7 per cent of Singapore's GDP, and Singapore is home to one of the world's busiest container ports, with more than 120,000 vessels calling annually, moving some 34 million containers.<sup>20</sup> Clashes or blockades between opposing maritime forces would affect commercial shipping firms, lower confidence in freight security, and drive up overall operating costs.



**Figure 2:** Map of crude oil trade flow, showing Singapore at the transit chokepoint<sup>21</sup>

So a stable region is critical to sustaining the economic development on which the security of the city-state depends. A strong economy provides the geo-economic and geo-political clout Singapore needs to negotiate in regional fora in support of its national interests. Consequently, Singapore's strategy has been to safeguard national security through free-trade agreements via multilateral, bilateral and regional arrangements. The general stability of the free-trading system achieved through economic diplomacy, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, have provided crucial leverage for Singapore to negotiate for mutual benefits.<sup>22</sup>

## Sustaining strong bilateral ties with China and playing constructive roles

Singapore's dependence on China has grown in tandem with the rise of the economic giant. Strong business ties with China have made Singapore the largest foreign investor country, with total trade amounting to S\$115.2 billion in 2013.<sup>23</sup> Despite the strong economic relations, China has no qualms in flexing its political muscle to remind Singapore of its expectation of strict adherence to the 'One-China principle'. In November 2016, nine of Singapore's armoured vehicles that had been training in Taiwan were seized by the Hong Kong Customs Service during their transit by commercial shipping back to Singapore.<sup>24</sup>

Beijing's rhetoric towards Singapore also arises from the perception of the city-state's alignment with the US over the South China Sea disputes. China perceives Singapore's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership as supporting the US pivot to Asia as part of a containment strategy.<sup>25</sup> US P-8A Poseidon maritime aircraft and littoral combat ships often utilise Singapore as a staging point to conduct routine patrols in the region.<sup>26</sup> Singapore's continued military engagements and support of the US military presence in Southeast Asia have become a perennial concern to China.

As the chair of ASEAN-China engagement, Singapore's active involvement in garnering a multilateral approach to defuse the tensions in the region runs contrary to China's preference for dealing individually with the claimants. In spite of the differences in opinions, bilateral ties between Singapore and China remain deep and resilient.<sup>27</sup> The cordial partnership between China and Singapore was seen in the resumption of the Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation in February 2017, with the signing of four cooperation pacts worth approximately S\$1.97 billion.<sup>28</sup>

The regular meetings of government leaders, business executives and people from both countries over recent decades have also served to enhance communications, and build greater trust and understanding. Such meetings can also provide the opportunity to clarify and converse privately with Chinese officials and leaders on the security of the region. Proposals for regional stability mechanisms, such as a code of conduct, can be discussed and mediated through Singapore at the ASEAN forum.

As a non-claimant to the islands in the South China Sea, Singapore adopts a neutral view and can play a constructive role to promote commonality and iron out differences over the contested territories. Known for its determination and skilful diplomacy, Singapore is well equipped to contribute constructively through dialogues, and foster security consensus in the region.<sup>29</sup>

## Look beyond ASEAN—partnership of like-minded middle powers

The security and destiny of Singapore depends on the utilisation of free trade and collaboration with different partner-nations to diversify and hedge against uncertainties. To quote the late Lee Kuan Yew:

A small country must seek a maximum number of friends while maintaining the freedom to be itself as a sovereign and independent nation.<sup>30</sup>

It is under this principle that Singapore should explore partnerships with like-minded middle powers that share the same balanced and neutral views on the South China Sea dispute. Partnerships with and between countries such as Australia, Indonesia, South Korea and Singapore can provide unbiased views and serve as mediators for the claimants. As non-claimants, these middle powers have a keen interest in Southeast Asia and, in many respects, share a coherent view of achieving peaceful resolution via a non-confrontational approach.<sup>31</sup> During the recent visit by Indonesia's President Widodo to Australia, Prime Minister Turnbull said:

We [Australia and Indonesia] have a vested interest in the peace and stability for our regions, seas and oceans.... So, we both strongly encourage countries in our region to resolve disputes in accordance with the international law, which is the foundation for stability and prosperity.<sup>32</sup>

The key focus of such partnerships should be on ensuring the freedom of navigation and safety of maritime activities in the South China Sea. Hence, to stem any further escalation of tensions in the region, joint diplomatic engagements by the middle powers with China at the various multilateral fora—such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+6, expanded East Asian Summit and Shangri-La Dialogue—could facilitate the discussions and realise a code of conduct mechanism. However, to be credible and effective, joint partnerships would need to be consistent in their engagements with China to reaffirm the importance of freedom of navigation and prevent unintended incidents in the disputed areas.

The message to China should be that coercive policies are counter-productive and that China may risk estrangement from friendly nations in the region. As Tim Huxley and Ben Schreer have asserted:

The more strongly China asserts itself in a way that regional states find threatening, the more likely it is that Beijing's worst-case scenario of encirclement by the US and its allies could become a reality.<sup>33</sup>



Diplomatic efforts should also seek to deter China from further militarising more artificial islands, and encourage it to abide by the provisions of UNCLOS (the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, to which it is a signatory) in the defence of its maritime zones and in pursuit of its territorial claims in the region. Finally, a partnership of middle powers could discourage the US from adopting an aggressive or confrontational approach to the South China Sea, which would likely further heighten tensions in the region.

## The expansion and implementation of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea

The CUES agreement was promulgated in September 2016 to improve the operational safety of naval aircraft and naval ships operating in the South China Sea.<sup>34</sup> The measures also mitigate uncertainty and improve real-time communications during unplanned encounters of military assets in the region. Nonetheless, there are two areas that could be enhanced to improve the robustness of CUES.

First, the current procedures do not include non-military entities such as coast guard vessels and fishery patrol boats.<sup>35</sup> The possibility of the US Coast Guard patrolling the region in the future, coupled with the instances of past clashes between Chinese Coast Guard vessels and fishing boats from the claimant states, lend emphasis to the inclusion of non-military assets.<sup>36</sup> The suggestion by Singapore's Foreign Affairs Minister, Vivian Balakrishnan, in early 2016 to expand the scope of CUES is timely, considering the possibility of increased maritime entities operating in the disputed areas.<sup>37</sup>

Next, China's proposal to conduct joint exercises to familiarise the protocols and reduce linguistic misinterpretation is a positive sign. In this aspect, Singapore's experience in regional maritime exercises (notably the Five Power Defence Arrangement) and in the inter-governmental Regional Co-operation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP) against ships in Asia makes it well equipped to coordinate any such joint training.<sup>38</sup>

The Information Fusion Centre, located in Singapore's Changi Naval Base and which serves the ReCAAP, is equipped with the database, maritime expertise and experience to conduct joint exercises for CUES.<sup>39</sup> Singapore's Chinese-educated naval officers could also assist in the linguistic challenge faced by the Chinese in the conduct of joint exercises. The nature of such joint training would promote mutual understanding and trust, which is a crucial confidence-building mechanism towards achieving safer and more secure maritime operations in the region.

## Conclusion

The empirical evidence of past flashpoints in the South China Sea, coupled with China's relentless pursuit to expand its strategic influence in the region and militarise the artificial islands, have injected uncertainties into the security environment in the South China Sea. An ambiguous US strategic policy, categorised by its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and seemingly increased military assertiveness in contesting China, has the potential to destabilise the region rapidly.

Unless ASEAN states can converge their national interests to assist in resolving the territorial claims with China, it is possible that the fragile stability in the region will become unsustainable. Like the non-claimant states that depend on the South China Sea for free trade and energy supplies, Singapore must safeguard its interests and contribute to sustaining peace and prosperity. Singapore's strong economic cooperation and longstanding ties with China put the city-state in a good position to engage China and convince it to play a constructive role in regional security.

Beyond ASEAN, it has been argued in this paper that Singapore should also explore new partnerships with like-minded middle powers that share the same balanced and neutral view of regional security. As non-claimants, these middle powers can leverage on diplomacy to sustain freedom of navigation and deter China from adopting a coercive policy in the South China Sea. To prevent an escalation of tension in the disputed waters, the partner nations could also mediate and restrain any confrontation that may arise between the US and China. To minimise incidents arising from unplanned maritime encounters in the region, Singapore is well positioned to assist in the expansion of the CUES initiative, and facilitate the conduct of joint exercises to enhance overall stability in the region.

## Notes

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