

## U.S.-Singapore *Indo-Pacific Conversation Series* #1 The United States and Singapore: 55 Years of Partnership

### Key Findings

Pacific Forum, in cooperation with S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), and with generous support from the U.S. Embassy in Singapore, organized the inaugural session of U.S.-Singapore *Indo-Pacific Conversation Series*, on December 14, 2020, virtually through the Zoom platform. Under the theme, “The United States and Singapore: 55 Years of Partnership,” the session was headlined by Dr. Satu Limaye (East West Center in Washington), Prof. Ja Ian Chong (National University of Singapore) and Amb. Chan Heng Chee (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute), and moderated by Pacific Forum President Robert Girrier. The webinar brought together some 140 participants mainly from the United States and Singapore, but also from other countries in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. The following are the key findings from the session.

Since independence, Singapore has benefitted from the U.S.-led liberal international order. Singapore’s growth and prosperity over the past half century has been predicated on free trade, and clear and predictable rules. A rules-based order allows smaller actors like Singapore to stay secure and determine its own future.

What differentiates Singapore from most Southeast Asian countries is its public and persistent support for continued U.S. military presence in the region. The U.S. military presence in Asia continues to be seen by Singapore as stabilizing.

U.S.-Singapore partnership is a “public good” that benefits not just the two countries but also the wider Indo-Pacific region.

The United States’ importance to Singapore is underscored by both economic and security imperatives. On the economic front, the U.S. remains Singapore’s largest source of investments, largest trading partner in terms of services, and third largest in terms of goods. On the security front, Singapore has robust military and intelligence cooperation with the U.S. Armed Forces.

In Washington, U.S.-Singapore partnership is viewed favorably and is seen as an asset for U.S. foreign policy. It is also an uncontroversial relationship, something that cannot be said of some U.S. bilateral relations in Southeast Asia.

U.S. relationship with Singapore is among the most “balanced” in terms of strategic underpinnings. The relationship does not rest on security, alone or just on commerce. This gives the partnership sustainability and endurance amidst the emerging challenges.

### Singaporean Concerns

Singaporean concerns on U.S. engagements in Asia revolve around credibility, capacity, unpredictability, and tendency for unilateralism.

In the past decade, there has been an increasing debate on whether Singapore needs to choose sides between the U.S. and China on many of the strategic issues hounding the region.

This discussion and other related debates between and among the policy communities in Singapore and wider Southeast Asia have resulted in some re-examination of the value of the U.S. presence. These debates are not only determined by the rising power and influence of China in the region, but also by some of the decisions and approaches taken by the United States in the past several years.

While Singapore has benefitted from continued U.S. presence, there are some worries about the endurance and seriousness of U.S. commitments. The concern about “Asia skipping” that broadly characterized Asian impressions of U.S. foreign policy during the George W. Bush Administration seemed to have returned under the Trump Administration.

U.S. attendance in regional dialogue institutions remains to be seen by Singaporeans and Southeast Asians as a key indicator of U.S. credibility and staying power.

The Trump Administration’s attendance at regional dialogue institutions has been seen largely as a snub of ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore that chaired the U.S.-ASEAN Summit in 2018. Coupled with the fact that there had been no designated American ambassador to Singapore for several years now, it has created an impression that Washington was not interested in the region, and that the Indo-Pacific policy was really all about Northeast Asia.

The Trump Administration’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership added more worries about U.S. commitments in Asia. The U.S.-led TPP was seen by Singapore as an ideal way forward for economic integration and openness in Asia. Singapore was disappointed by U.S. withdrawal from the multilateral trade negotiation.

The increased friction between the United States and China puts more pressure on countries like Singapore on how to manage competing great power interests. The “not choosing sides” approach remains Singapore’s preference, whenever possible, in navigating complex U.S.-China strategic issues. Singapore wants to avoid upsetting any of the major powers.

The increased friction also means that there will be more efforts on the part of China and the U.S. to influence Singaporean preferences, policymakers, and elites. This will likely accelerate commercial and technological decoupling, which poses a unique and particular challenge for U.S.-Singapore relations.

The decoupling will add more pressure on regional countries to choose a side. Singapore’s high reliance on trade as a share of GDP does mean the U.S.-China decoupling will have significant economic ramifications.

## U.S. Dilemma

Finding the right “balance” in managing China’s assertiveness is difficult on the part of the United States. There were times when Singapore was concerned that the United States was insufficiently engaged in responding to assertive Chinese behavior in Southeast Asia. But there were also times when concerns

were expressed in Singapore about the dangers of Washington “overdoing” its response to Beijing’s disruptive actions.

Relevant to this is the narrative on “choosing sides.” While Washington has been clear that its Asia policy is not about forcing Singapore and Southeast Asia to choose between the United States and China, policies that preserve existing rules and norms, and advance a free, open and rules-based region need to be communicated in clearer and more innovative ways.

While there is an expectation that the new Biden Administration will reverse many of Trump’s more inward-looking economic policies, such may not come about as quickly. The United States, under President Biden is unlikely to return to TPP and will likely focus first on domestic policy issues, such as containing COVID-19, rolling out vaccines, promoting economic recovery and advancing middle class concerns.

As Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and TPP-11 continue to advance and re-shape the economic landscape of the Indo-Pacific, Washington will have to re-think its approach and ways to still be part of Asia’s economic integration story moving forward.

## Ways forward

On the political front, the United States and Singapore should deepen engagements that can demonstrate commitment. Among the low-hanging fruits for the Biden Administration is to reverse Trump’s attendance record in ASEAN meetings and to immediately appoint an ambassador to Singapore.

To influence discourse on “choosing sides” and to find the “right balance” in pushing back against Chinese assertiveness in the region, the United States needs to engage more with the policy communities and thought leaders in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Doing so would inform strategic choices and influence narratives that can lead to greater alignment in terms of approaches and policy.

On the economic front, since it is becoming inevitable for the U.S.-China rivalry to accelerate commercial and technological decoupling, there should be greater coordination between Singapore and the United States on cyber policies, security of critical infrastructure, and trade of sensitive technologies and other goods that have national security implications.

While Singapore and the rest of Asia should not expect the U.S. to be back to multilateral trade negotiations any time soon, there are opportunities for the U.S. to engage with Singapore and the wider region on economic issues. This can be done by focusing on niche areas such as institutionalizing intellectual property rights protection, promoting cyber and technology norms, research and development, and refining investment rules and standards, among others, sans a big multilateral trade deal.

On the security front, the relation has been on an upward trajectory since the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the United States Use of Facilities in Singapore, which continued with the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement and the 2015 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement. The

close bilateral security ties persisted under the Trump Administration when both sides signed the Protocol of Amendment to the 1990 MOU in 2019.

But the two countries need to sustain and build upon these initiatives for the security relationship to withstand pressures and future crises on issues ranging from maritime security to cyber, and from China to climate change. Policy suggestions include linking U.S.-Singapore military engagements with those of other key allies and partners.

*These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussions. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of all speakers and of the Pacific Forum. This is not a consensus document. For more information, please contact Jeffrey Ordaniel [jeffrey@pacforum.org], Director of Maritime Programs (non-resident), Pacific Forum.*