



United States–Singapore Indo–Pacific Conversation Series #2

## Securing the Indo–Pacific: Advancing U.S.–Singapore Defense Cooperation

*featuring Prof. Tan See Seng, Veerle Nouwens, and Dr. David Santoro*

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### — Key Findings —

#### **Introduction**

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 U.S.-Singapore Indo-Pacific Conversation Series #2, on January 28, 2021, virtually through the Zoom platform. Under the theme, “Securing the Indo-Pacific: Advancing U.S.-Singapore Defense Cooperation,” the session was headlined by Prof. Tan See Seng (RSIS) and Veerle Nouwens (Royal United Services Institute), and moderated by Pacific Forum Vice-President David Santoro. The webinar brought together some 91 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.

The U.S.-Singapore strategic partnership is longstanding and broad, built on different agreements and cooperation mechanisms that date back several decades. Both countries understand the fragility of the security landscape, and support rules-based international system. Bilateral defense cooperation is most apparent in the maritime domain. The fact that Singapore has the world’s busiest port makes the security partnership even more relevant for the wider region. Singapore is the only country in the region to contribute resources to the U.S.-led global coalition to defeat ISIS, which shows how U.S.-Singapore cooperation is not contained in Singapore’s immediate neighborhood.

Nevertheless, while Singapore strongly agrees with the values and principles the new U.S. Asia policy embodies, it has avoided open support for the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. The reason is clear. For a long time, Singapore has had China as a major trading partner. This puts Singapore in a very difficult position whenever there is a demand to adopt a hard-line stance against China.

When the Sino-U.S. strategic competition accelerated during the Trump Administration, it further fuelled Singapore's fear of regional instability, which can put its economic priorities and security interest on a collision course. Singapore does not see a containment of China as a viable policy. It hopes to see some form of power-sharing arrangement to prevent dangerous instability. The coexistence of competition and cooperation in U.S.-China relations will likely persist for some time. Despite its wolf warrior diplomacy, China is in no position to take on the global leadership role the United States has played so far.

Singapore has been a reliable U.S. partner in the region. This has been underpinned by Singapore's belief that Washington still plays a stabilizing role in Southeast Asia, allowing countries, to prosper. However, this belief has been under strain in recent years.

Singapore hopes that the Biden Administration will be able to collaborate with China on some issues despite prevailing arguments among the policy communities that cooperation is becoming harder to achieve, and that the new Administration "will be tough on China." Singapore will look for opportunities to work with both sides and to stabilize U.S.-China relationship in ways that recognize the centrality of ASEAN. Singapore welcomes U.S. Secretary of State Blinken's assurance that Washington will consult with ASEAN on important issues affecting the region. While Singapore supports the United States' vision for the region, it marches to its own drumbeat. "Singapore is hedging big time."

## Recommendations

- There is a need to restore "faith" in American commitment to Asia, particularly Southeast Asia. Achieving this can begin simply by "speaking up and showing up." The United States should send high-level delegations to ASEAN Summits every year, while also articulating aligned security interests whenever appropriate, not just exclusive U.S. interest. Attendance is seen by Southeast Asians, including by Singapore, as a demonstration of commitment and priority.
- Maritime capacity-building should be considered as a form U.S.-Singapore bilateral cooperation. This would help other Southeast Asian states improve their capability to safeguard the region's waterways and fulfill their obligations under international law.
- Singapore should consider putting forward mechanisms that complement American capacity-building efforts in maritime Southeast Asia.
- U.S.-Singapore partnership should not be detached from other U.S. partnerships in the region. There should be some coordination with other likeminded states to amplify efforts and promote a common conception of "rules-based" order.

- The U.S. and Singapore should manage expectations on how to deal with China, especially on security-related challenges.
- Singapore should be clear on what role it wants Washington to play in regional security beyond existing bilateral cooperation, that would achieve a stable regional security environment. This would allow American policymakers to better tailor their security cooperation with the wider region, without appearing as though it is asking Southeast Asian states to choose sides.
- U.S. engagement in the region should achieve balance. There should be a good balance between and among security, economic and political engagements. An over-reliance on security engagement will result in a narrative that Washington is only interested in containing China, and nothing else. Containing China is not attractive to Southeast Asians, considering the economic and security implications. Most countries in the region do not have the capabilities to respond to Chinese coercion should things go out of hand.
- There is an observation that Washington has been merely reacting to China-related developments in the region. U.S. needs to be more proactive (vice merely being reactive to events).
- The U.S. should leverage its strong network of allies and partners to achieve economic and security goals.

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*This document was prepared by Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel, Director, Maritime Programs, Pacific Forum. For more information, please contact Ariel Stenek, Director, Young Leaders Program, Pacific Forum at [ariel@pacforum.org](mailto:ariel@pacforum.org). These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussion. This is not a consensus document. The views expressed are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants.*

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