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Global Fight Against IS: Singapore's Role in Counter-Terrorism

By Juhi Ahuja

Synopsis

On 2 August 2016, the Prime Minister of Singapore announced the state's intention to enhance its support for the global coalition to fight against Islamic State (IS). This has raised concerns that it would make the island more susceptible to terror attacks. However, this was a strategic decision which both intensifies Singapore's defence against IS, and its relationship with the US.

Commentary

SINGAPORE PRIME Minister Lee Hsien Loong's recent official visit to Washington on the invitation of President Barack Obama has drawn much media attention in Singapore and the surrounding region. While in the United States, PM Lee announced Singapore's intention to step up support for the US-led coalition in the fight against the so-called Islamic State in the Middle East. He announced that after assessing the current situation in the war-torn region, Singapore would deploy a medical team to Iraq and soldiers from the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) Army Deployment Force for protection.

Amid fears that further support to the coalition will make Singapore more prone to terror attacks, it must also be understood that in doing so, Singapore attempts to safeguard its vital interests on all fronts to ensure its security. Along with defending its national security, its support for the coalition also has the impact of reaffirming diplomatic ties with the United States in a climate of unrest in the Southeast Asian region stoked by tensions in the South China Sea.

Security Threat Either Way

The manner and scope of IS is currently such that attacks are carried out in countries all over the world by individuals or affiliated groups motivated by a similar ideology. Given that Singapore has already been established as an IS target, it is liable to terror attacks regardless of its participation in the global coalition against the terrorist organisation. As PM Lee stated in a press conference after this announcement: “If they [terrorists] see Indonesia and Malaysia as legitimate targets, all the more Singapore (as) a rational, open, cosmopolitan country, and not what they think countries should be ... should be attacked.”

As illustrated by the recently foiled terror plot in Batam, and other successful attacks in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore is situated in a vulnerable environment. The government of Singapore identified the threat to its national security from similar extremist violence when it became aware of the Jemaah Islamiyah network in 2001.

The ideology that propels such extremist violence justifies a threat to Singapore regardless of its participation in any international coalition to fight the IS. Had Singapore chosen not to be part of the coalition, it is unlikely that threat perceptions would change as Singapore continues to have good relations with the US and other Western states.

Strategic Great-Power Balancing

As part of Singapore’s larger defence strategy, its interest lies in managing great-power relations between the US and China such that both states maintain friendly terms with the island state. It does so by forging alliances with more powerful states to protect itself from overbearing influence from other powerful states. It is in the interest of Singapore that either state (US or China) does not feel threatened by the other’s relationship with Singapore, as it could upset Singapore’s strategic interests in either state and in the regional power balance.

In light of the unstable South China Sea disputes, Singapore has been careful to maintain strategic distance from the issue, despite pressure from both the US and China. Although the fight against IS and the South China Sea disputes are two separate issues, Singapore must carefully weigh all its international commitments to calculate how each can affect the other.

Its commitment to the coalition is likely to signal its reaffirmation of Singapore’s interest to enhance strong diplomatic ties with the US, while not signalling a threat to China – as it is a matter of counter-terrorism and national security. US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter has said before that some members of the coalition do not even contribute much; a sign that some are in it just for the benefits of being in the group.

Since the outcome of an international tribunal ruling, China has asked Singapore to respect its position on the South China Sea disputes, and has reminded the small state of their critical relationship – which could potentially be jeopardised. It is unlikely that Singapore’s membership in the coalition will affect Singapore-China

relations. Nevertheless, Singapore will have to present its position on the South China Sea issue with care.

Fighting Terrorism and Political Pressure Together

Singapore has significant interest in being part of the coalition and supporting it further. In case of a terrorist attack, it will be able to gain assistance from the US on legitimate and compassionate grounds. Furthermore, benefits of being in the coalition and hence improving bilateral ties with the US include reduced vulnerability to attack, intelligence-sharing, and counter-terrorism initiatives such as data-analytics and early-warning protection capabilities. Additionally, Singapore and the US have agreed to extend the Combating Terrorism Research and Development agreement for another decade.

Had Singapore chosen not to participate in the coalition, there might have been political and social pressure to do so – as it directly impacts internal security and diplomatic relationships. Since Singapore announced its intention to join the coalition in 2014 and the recent declaration to support it further, concerned and opposing voices have risen in the public space.

However, it must be understood that violent extremists need almost any excuse to threaten those whom they do not agree with. Those who are afraid of an increased security threat to Singapore should consider both scenarios carefully, and also analyse the implications of shying away from assisting the global coalition against IS. The political and security setbacks could be higher for Singapore if it is solely self-reliant.

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