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## **Strengthening US-Singapore Strategic Partnership: Opportunities and Challenges**

*By Prashanth Parameswaran*

### **Synopsis**

*Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to the United States last week capped efforts by the two countries to advance their strategic partnership during the Obama administration. But both sides will need to navigate challenges to ensure this trajectory continues into the future.*

### **Commentary**

SINGAPORE PRIME Minister Lee Hsien Loong paid an official visit to the United States at the invitation of outgoing US President Barack Obama from 31 July to 5 August 2016. Apart from the symbolic significance of the trip – which included the rare honour of a state dinner to commemorate 50 years of their diplomatic ties – the visit capped efforts by both countries to strengthen their strategic partnership during the two terms of the Obama administration.

Those efforts have been successful so far in boosting cooperation across a range of areas. Still, both sides will also have to navigate challenges to ensure that this trajectory continues in the coming years.

### **Strengthening the Strategic Partnership**

Both the United States and Singapore have long viewed each other as vital partners. For Singapore, America's regional presence provided it with the stability and time to emerge as one of the world's most advanced economies. Today, the US is also Singapore's top foreign direct investor as well as a key provider of defence technology and facilities for military training.

For Washington, Singapore has played an outsized role as a regional partner, at times one even bigger than some treaty allies. When the US closed its bases in the Philippines in 1992, Singapore agreed to host a US Navy logistics command unit that coordinates regional operations. During the George W. Bush administration, it was Singapore that got the US to join the P-4 trade network that grew into what is now sometimes referred to as the “US-led” Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

US-Singapore relations have strengthened considerably under the Obama administration, particularly since the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. In 2012 the relationship was formally upgraded to a strategic partnership, which led to the creation of an annual Strategic Partnership Dialogue (SPD) featuring top diplomats from both sides. David Adelman, then the US ambassador to Singapore, wrote that the SPD and other related developments that year had “moved [the] bilateral relationship up a weight class”.

Since then, both sides have expanded their relationship across several areas realms, a trend that continued with Prime Minister Lee’s visit to Washington. On the economic side, the US-Singapore Third Country Training Programme (TCTP) – an initiative where both sides jointly assist lesser developed Southeast Asian states – is still hailed by US officials as a paragon of bilateral cooperation. More recently, economic collaboration has extended into areas like the digital economy and smart cities.

Security ties have also been on the uptick. Last year, both sides inked an Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) that paved the way for greater cooperation in fields like cybersecurity and biodefence. Singapore has also agreed to rotationally host littoral combat ships (LCS) and P-8 Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft, while Washington is looking to expand training opportunities for the Singapore Armed Forces in the US. With these developments, one Singaporean official told this author that the defence relationship now “looks qualitatively different than it did even just five years ago”.

Even deeper collaboration could be in the cards. The US seeks to further develop the US-ASEAN Connect – a new initiative that seeks to coordinate American regional economic engagement. Singapore will have a bigger role to play in it as one of its three designated ASEAN hubs.

And if the city-state does end up acquiring the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, it could deepen its interoperability not only with the US but potentially a broader network of US allies and partners including Australia and Japan.

### **Confronting Challenges: The US**

But even as both sides continue to strengthen their strategic partnership, they will each also have to confront a series of challenges over the next few years.

For the US, the challenge is two-fold. The first is addressing domestic constraints that could affect its credibility to deliver on its commitments. On the security side, sequestration still threatens to undermine US military power and presence unless

America's leaders find a way to address the budget cuts initially outlined in the 2011 Budget Control Act.

On the economic side, both parties must confront the domestic populism that has eroded the support for the TPP and approve an ambitious trade agreement that will set high standards for the world to follow. As Prime Minister Lee correctly suggested at a press conference in Washington last week, failing to conclude the TPP would be a huge blow to US credibility.

Washington will also need to deftly manage a complex array of regional and global challenges while sustaining the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. The Obama administration, to its credit, has repeatedly resisted intervening militarily in crises for fear that it may consume its attention and derail its Asia focus.

But as the US confronts a more tumultuous world, marked by a simmering Middle East, resurgent Russia, divided Europe, weak global economy, and a menacing Islamic State, the pressure for intervention or activism elsewhere is growing, thereby threatening to distract Washington from Asia. It remains to be seen whether the next president can ensure that the US has the bandwidth to continue to invest not only in its Asian alliances but strategic partnerships too.

### **Singapore's Challenges**

Singapore, too, faces its share of challenges. As it strengthens ties with the US, it will need to maintain a careful balance to simultaneously develop a closer relationship with China. Despite repeated denials by Singapore policymakers, some Chinese interlocutors privately refer to the city-state as conspiring with Washington to contain Beijing, a perception only reinforced by the hosting of P-8s and LCS ships.

This will be an especially tricky balancing act as Singapore continues in its role as country coordinator for ASEAN-China dialogue relations, particularly given the propensity of major powers to interfere in the regional grouping's deliberations on issues like the South China Sea.. Singaporean officials have already found this to be the case with Laos' ASEAN chairmanship this year, with a failure to adopt a joint statement in Kunming, China and nearly a similar outcome in Vientiane.

Singapore's gradual shift to a more competitive political landscape in the coming years could also pose a challenge in its strategic partnership with Washington. Though the ruling People's Action Party continues to perform well at the polls, politics is becoming more contested, with a greater diversity of actors. Old differences over rights and freedoms could surface anew, but some uncertainty could also come from the next US president's approach to domestic political developments in Singapore.

To be sure, none of these challenges are insurmountable. Singapore has proven to be adept, at times seemingly against all odds. The US for its part has repeatedly proven resilient in spite of doubt about its staying power. Perhaps most importantly, as President Obama said during his toast at the State Dinner, the two countries share a commitment to build something special together as they have done for the past 50 years.

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