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The Military and Small States : the role of hard power in Singapore's domestic and foreign policy

Abstract

In many ways, Singapore provides an excellent case study of how a small state has used hard power to its advantage and effectively. Despite being confronting with all-round constraints of geography, demography, economic weakness and strategic weakness in the face of Great and Regional Powers' pressures, the Republic, through a judicious mix of building up national defense capability and synergies with external strategic partners have been able to secure itself rather effectively both during the Cold and Post-Cold War era. However, of late, in view of changing global paradigms, especially brought about by globalization and the non-usability of hard power in different arena, there has been a new emphasis on soft power. Still, the tried and trusted dependence on hard power has not been sacrificed, with military power and a strong economy, supplemented with strong internal control of the political system have remained the mainstay of Singapore's defence policy.

Introduction

It is almost axiomatic to assume that military power lies in the domain of Middle, Great and Super Powers. Small states, which by definition are defined by intense vulnerability, have no business whatsoever to accumulate military power. If any small states do so, it is believed to be behaving irrationally and thus, by convention, courting disaster. Yet, depending on how one defines a small state, there are a number of exceptional cases where small states have accumulated military power and have used military diplomacy to reduce their vulnerability and even be in a position to pose a threat of others. Israel easily fits this case even though there is a need to understand the special circumstances Israel finds itself geopolitically in the Middle East. An almost similar case

can also be made for Singapore even though the circumstances are again different from of Israel. What is important is that both Israel and Singapore, had over the years, to respond in similar fashion, where there was an acute need to supplement their military power with new techniques to ensure the effectiveness of their defense and foreign policy. In today's parlance, while hard power has proved highly effective for small states such as Singapore and Israel, increasingly there has been a need to supplement this with soft power. Against this backdrop, this paper, following defining hard and soft power, examines the role of military power for small states and with reference to Singapore, analyses how various changes had to be factored in to develop a more sophisticated defense strategy to ensure its national survival.

Defining Hard and Soft Power

In the literature of international relations and security studies, the notion of hard and soft power have become mainstream terminologies and used with great frequency. The notion of 'soft power' was popularized by Joseph Nye, an American scholar and former Pentagon official. While many tend to focus on Nye's 2002 book, *The Paradox of American Power*¹, in actuality, in his 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*,² he was already arguing against those who believed that the United States was in decline merely because of the reduced utility of military force in international relations. Instead, Nye argued that the US had a wide array of 'powers', especially 'soft power' that continued to placed here in a position of primus inter pares.

¹ Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, (Basic Books, 1990).

Nye has consistently maintain this position as is evident in his article in The International Herald Tribune with reference to the ‘War on Terror’:

Soft power is the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will. Both hard and soft power is important in the war on terrorism, but attraction is much cheaper than coercion, and an asset that needs to be nourished.³

The essential difference between hard and soft power lay in the manner of achieving a state’s goal. Hard power, mainly focusing on a state’s military and economic power, emphasized the coercive aspect, where through coercion others are compelled to behave in a manner demanded by the coercer. Contrasting this, soft power is the attempt to shape the behavior of other states through attractions. While hard power focuses on the power to coerce, soft power emphasizes on the power of persuasion. While the latter is achieved through tangible elements such as military and economic strength, the latter is achieved through intangibles such as culture, values and institutions. Thus, according to Nye, soft power emanates from three elements : “a state’s culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (where it lives up to them at home or abroad), and its foreign policies (where they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)”⁴ To that extent, the dichotomy between hard and soft power connotes contending foreign policy approaches that uses punitive or collaborative force to achieve national goals even though in reality, the situation is much more complex as hard power, say military means can also be used for humanitarian purposes, thereby qualifying as part of soft power, as

³ See Joseph Nye, “Propaganda Isn’t the Way: Soft Power”, *The International Herald Tribune*, 10 January 2003.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

was undertaken by the United States during the Tsunami disaster in Aceh, Indonesia in late 2004 and early 2005.

The Military and Small States

The insecurity of small states has been a dominant discourse in international relations, especially since the decolonization propelled many small states into independence and where they form the largest number of states in the international system.⁵ However, by definition, as they lack most resources of power, particularly military wherewithal, military insecurity has been particularly poignant and exposed them to all types of threats from within and without. While the debate as to what constitutes a small state continues, in many ways, the inability to achieve national security is one common denominator.

This has also, very much, affected the behavior of small states, with the inability and unwillingness to use military force as one of the key defining feature. According to Maurice East, traditionally, a small state's foreign policy behavior encompassed the following pattern:

- a. Low levels of overall participation in world affairs;
- b. High levels of activity in inter-governmental organizations;
- c. High levels of support of international legal norms;
- d. Avoidance of the use of force as a technique of statecraft;
- e. Avoidance of such behavior and policies that tend to alienate the more powerful states in the system;

⁵ For various studies, see Talukdar Maniruzzaman, *The Security of Small States in the Third World*, (Canberra: The Australian National University, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 1982); Marshal R. Singer, *Weak States in a World of Powers*, (New York: The Free Press, 1972); Stuart A. Cohen, "Small States and their Armies: Restructuring the Militia Framework of the Israeli Defense Force", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December 1995);

- f. A narrow functional and geographic range of concerns in foreign policy activities; and
- g. Frequent utilization of moral and normative positions on international issues.⁶

Following from the above logic, a small state could adopt a low profile posture in international relations in order to reduce risks to its security as well as to optimize the use of the scarce resources at its disposal. While this represented a rational approach, the very constraints confronted by many small states might however compel it to adopt irrational and high risk positions in international relations. The lack of qualitative and quantitative assets would mean fewer inputs in the country foreign policy establishment (overseas missions, etc) and process (skilled personnel to monitor global developments). It would lead to a selective focus of what constitutes its interests both geographically and functionally, emphasizing on areas with immediate interest to the state. This means an inability to monitor all events and might disadvantage it in terms of coping with changes. The very limitation may lead the state to be involved in conflictual behavior, arising in part, from an erroneous reading of the external developments and threats. As the international situation or crisis reaches a climax, a small state might be obliged to respond, with very little alternatives or options. Hence, while a small state is expected to adopt a low-risk posture internationally, unwittingly, high risk posture might be foisted on her due to the very constraints arising from being a small state.

Still, the military aspect of security has remained an important aspect of policies related to small states. This is primarily because this aspect of insecurity poses the most

⁶ See Maurice A. East, "Size and Foreign Policy Behavior : A Test of Two Models", *World Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 4, July 1973, p.557.

fatal threat to most small states. The study released by the Commonwealth Consultative Group titled *Vulnerability: Small States in the Globalised Society* in 1985 remains largely relevant today. The study argued that most small states are defined by the different types of vulnerabilities they face. The Report identified “three major categories of threats to security: threats to territorial security resulting from incursions to both military and non-military sources; threats to political security, which can involve a broad range of actions that are deliberately intended to influence, and in some cases, bring about a specific change in the threatened state’s national policies; and threats to economic security involving action that can have the effect of undermining a state’s economic welfare and which additionally can also be used as an instrument for political interference”.⁷ As such, even though small states are confronted with multidimensional insecurities, the danger posed by military threat is particularly serious.

In view of this multidimensionality, the Report recommended a number of measures to reduce vulnerabilities of small states. This included:

- a. Strengthening national defense capability;
- b. Entering into defense arrangements with other states either on a bilateral, special multilateral or regional basis;
- c. Underpinning security through economic growth by adopting sound national policies as well as advancing regional cooperation;
- d. Promoting internal cohesion; and
- e. Adopting a sound diplomacy at both the bilateral and multilateral levels.⁸

While the Commonwealth Report had sound diagnosis and recommendations, the end of the Cold War, at least, initially signaled the great reduction of the use of military power internationally. This position remained largely true until

⁷ See *Vulnerability: Small States in the Globalised Society*, (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1985), p.23.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990 and it took a strong international military coalition sanctioned by the United Nations but under the leadership of the US to reverse the aggression. Since then, and following the onset of the global ‘war on terror’ since September 2001, big and small states alike have in a way rediscovered the importance of investing heavily in military power even though this was also the very time when Joseph Nye and others were discussing the growing importance of soft power to attain national security. In a way, while military power was important, at the same time, the usefulness of soft power could not be ignored. How has Singapore, one of the smallest states in the world in terms of land size, viewed hard and soft power, and what does it tell us about securing small states in the international system.

Singapore’s Military Policy : key determinants

Living up to its name, Singapore which in Sanskrit means ‘Lion City’, the city state’s leadership has always emphasized the importance of military power for survival and security. This has become an article of faith as far as national policy is concerned. This approach to politics in general and security in particular was largely a function of the various imperatives that determine Singapore’s security orientation.⁹ They flow out of five main key determinants.

⁹ See Yuan Li-Wu, “Planning Security for a Small Nation: Lessons from Singapore”, *Pacific Community*, Vol. 3, No. 4, July 1972; Tix Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000); Bilveer Singh, *The Vulnerability of Small States Revisited: A Study of Singapore’s Post-Cold War Foreign Policy*, (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1999); and Michael Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

The Encumbrance of Geography

Located at the southern end of the Straits of Malacca, one of the busiest sea-lanes of the world, Singapore's fate and fortune have been tied to its geographical position. Singapore, being situated in the centre of Southeast Asia, has been the focal point of communications and entrepot trade for the region since the time of Stamford Raffles, the East India Company official who secured Singapore for the British Crown in 1819. First being an important port facility for the east-west trade in the nineteenth century, its importance to communications continued to grow as technology advances. Currently, Singapore is the leading telecommunications hub and gateway to the region for air travelers while maintaining its dominance over both local and international shipping.

Singapore's strategic location at the juncture of two of the world's greatest oceans, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, has made it of interest to the leading world powers, especially maritime powers. During the colonial days, Britain developed Singapore to be its chief naval port in the region to safeguard its strategic interests and dominate in the region. In the 1960s, at the height of the Vietnam War, United States' presence in Singapore was greatly felt as Singapore became an important base for the gathering of military resources and the centre of deployment of American troops to Indochina. Even though the last British soldiers left in 1971, American presence in Singapore has remained very strong. In recent years, Singapore has further developed its naval facilities to cater to visiting American vessels and it is the only location in Southeast Asia that has the ability to service American aircraft carriers and where aircraft carriers can land onshore.

Malaysia to the north and east of Singapore while Indonesia spans from the west to the south and to the east of Singapore, literally and physically surrounds the island republic, leading it to be described as a 'land locked state'. The two traditional regional powers of largely Muslim-Malay descent have not always been friendly to Singapore. The centre of Southeast Asia is traditionally known as the Malay Archipelago, and Singapore's existence in this geographical area is a glaring anomaly as its population, a resultant of British colonial immigration policies, is predominantly ethnic Chinese who are politically dominant and remains the only state outside China (Taiwan included) to be predominantly governed by ethnic Chinese. This has resulted in the perception that Singapore is a Chinese state, and when juxtaposed with its two very much larger Malay neighbors, is a 'juicy Chinese nut in a Malay nutcracker'. These border pressures although common to many countries, are particularly challenging to Singapore. Not only is Singapore just a fraction of the size of Indonesia and Malaysia, Singapore also has a significant minority ethnic Malay population. The governance of this ethnic minority has to be of the utmost sensitivity as Singapore's neighbors are politically dominated by the Malay-Muslims. Muslim ethnicity is a problem due to the potential of ethnic chauvinism in the region. Also, ethnic issues can be manipulated due to jealousy concerning Singapore's progress. All these developments can threaten Singapore's security.

The Burden of Demography

According to Singapore's Department of Statistics, as of June 2006, Singapore residents, comprising of citizens and permanent residents stood at about 3.608 million people of whom 75.18% were ethnic Chinese, 13.62% ethnic Malays, 8.84% ethnic

Indians and 2.36% of other ethnic minorities.¹⁰ The breakdown of ethnic groupings or races in Singapore's context is an inheritance from British colonialism. As a result of economic needs and British immigration policies over the years, Singapore has become a plural society with the Chinese dominating both the politics and economy of Singapore since the Second World War, when the right to organize politically was sanctioned by the colonial authorities. This situation of Chinese dominance has become a potential focal point of ethnic conflagration because Singapore is located in the heart of the Malay World.

The most pressing challenge of demography which bears heavily on Singapore is the governance of its ethnic groups. Given that it is not easy to govern a plural society, the situation has become even more challenging when the strategic minority of Singapore is the dominant majority of the larger neighborhood where Singapore is located. Due to this geopolitical location, the Republic has to be extremely sensitive to external pressures and extraneous groups that have an innate interest in the Republic's domestic politics. The issue of ethnic management is not an imagined predicament but real that impacts upon its domestic and external relations. From the racial riots in Singapore in 1950 and 1964 to Malaysia's violent May 13 1969 racial riots and the more recent uprising against ethnic Indonesian Chinese in May 1998, the question of ethnicity is a complex issue that requires careful and meticulous management and calibration. The social fabric in Singapore is extremely fragile and vulnerable to manipulations, creating fear of insecurities that inter-ethnic violence can break easily.

¹⁰ See Singapore Resident Population, 1990-2006 (Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry, December 2006), p.23.

The core concern of the governance of ethnic relations in Singapore centers predominantly on the Chinese-Malay relationship. As Singapore is often regarded as a 'Third China' or worse, a state that was formerly a Malay island and where its rightful owners, the Malays, have been displaced, Chinese-Malay tensions have continued unabated and are something that cannot be taken for granted. Because of the geo-political configuration of being surrounded by Malay neighbors, Singapore leaders have on many occasions expressed their fears of the 'dangerous, even irrational neighborhood' and even publicly doubted the loyalties of Malay Singaporeans. An often quoted statement is Lee Kuan Yew's admittance that he does not trust a Malay officer to be in command of a machine gun crew just as his son, Lee Hsien Loong, had claimed that he does not want a Malay to be put in a position of difficulty due to his religion. This clearly highlights the continued tensions between the Chinese and Malays within Singapore and this has regional implications in terms of difficult relations between Singapore and its neighbors, especially Malaysia.

The Nightmare of the Economy

Economically, Singapore is a deficit territory as it is a relatively small island which lacks natural resources and a hinterland to support its population. These concerns of Singapore were not raised during the colonial period as Singapore was administered together with Malaya. These limitations came to the foreground when Malaya was granted independence and Singapore was separated from it. The call for merger in the late 1950s and early 1960s argued about the impossibilities of Singapore to survive

independently. However, with the separation of 1965, Singapore had no choice but to venture on its own to ensure not only its political survival, but also its economic survival. In many ways, political survival was predicated on economic survival.

Since Stamford Raffles successful negotiations to establish a trading post in Singapore the island has been dependent on trade for its economic prosperity. With no natural resources to depend on, Singapore inadvertently focused its attention on the manufacturing sector. In the face of stiff competition, Singapore was quick to diversify its economic interest. Under the leadership of the PAP government, Singapore has been constantly venturing into the latest economic sectors dependent on skilled and professional workforce. The island Republic cannot compete in terms of labor cost with its surrounding neighbors but posses, as a prized asset, a highly educated and disciplined workforce.

Singapore, being intensively linked to the world economy, is highly sensitive to the fluctuations of the open market. Over the years, Singapore has placed great importance on the management of its budget and never fails to accumulate surpluses which act as a buffer in times of need. The government has also taken the lead in ensuring the prudent handling of Singapore's financial assets by establishing government-linked companies and investment arms to diversify Singapore's economic pot. Hailed as a model for developmental states, Singapore's concern over its economy is driven not by desire for wealth, but the fact that Singapore has no natural resources or hinterland to fall back upon. If the state is ever in threat, its first and foremost line of

defense is its economic linkages to the world market. It is to the benefit of all if Singapore remains economically vibrant as there is more to gain from cooperation than contestation. Furthermore, Singapore's reserves, which are among the world's largest, act as the safety net for the state.

The Baggage of Political Experience and Heritage

The course of history has a tremendous impact on the development of Singapore politics. Societies do not come into being in a vacuum as they are products shaped by the cumulative experiences of their members. The historical lessons from colonial rule to the turbulent period of merger and separation with the Federation of Malaysia, Singapore's political leaders have learnt to be cautious of their actions and inactions. The challenging era of the 1960s has caused Singapore to have deep-seated concerns of its immediate neighbors. While Singapore-Indonesia bilateral relations are of strategic importance, Singapore-Malaysia relations are of an even higher importance, a 'special relationship' created from the contentious experiences throughout the years.

Feeling 'isolated' from the Malay World, Singapore leadership has developed a 'siege mentality' that views Singapore as being under constant threat from its neighbors. This in turn has cultivated the political elite in Singapore to constantly push Singapore forward in every aspect. There is no room for failure and unless Singapore is able to invent or innovate, it risks being wiped out into oblivion. While Singapore is unable to move away from the burdens of its political experiences and heritage, it resorts to use them as tools to promote a sense of nationhood as Singapore is portrayed as a state that is

eternally faced with crises. In a way, Singapore is a crisis state, as crises have erupted regularly and the government has been able to align the population behind it, leading in turn, where the crisis is usually surmounted through wise policies. While the past remains relevant and has been a source of inspiration (against all odds), nevertheless as long as Singapore leaders are unable to move out of the shadow of crisis mentality, they will always remain a prisoner of the past.

The Millstone of the External Environment

Singapore has never and will never believe that it can be isolated from the rest of the world. To survive, Singapore must engage the international community. As the world continues to globalize at a rapid pace, Singapore has always been mindful of its position in the international community. What it lacks in physical size, it complements with a wealth of leadership, moral authority and of course, a very healthy bank account. Singapore has played a key role in leading newly independent states in the UN, forming a significant bloc in the General Assembly. Moreover, Singapore has contributed tremendously to develop United Nations Conference of the Law of the Sea, not only for the sake of better global governance, but to ensure Singapore's survival which depends heavily on unhindered access through the sea lanes of communications.

Being the richest state (with the exception of Brunei) in the region, Singapore has to be mindful of its neighbors. Unable to take up the helm of leadership of ASEAN due to the presence of traditional leaders such as Indonesia and Malaysia, Singapore cautiously treads around in the neighborhood. In recent years, the region has been struck with

several natural calamities. In these natural disasters, Singapore has been first to assist its neighbors. For example, in the wake of the 2004 tsunami that devastated the province of Aceh in Indonesia, Singapore was the first to land rescue personnel and deployed its armed forces to aid in the rescue and recovery of lives. Even though some may argue that Singapore's actions were altruistic, in reality, Singapore had no option but to assist as it was the only state amongst its immediate neighbors that was spared the effects of the tsunami. Also, it had the resources and expertise in terms of machinery, manpower and money to carry out the rescue missions. Given that these 'other than war' operations are valuable experiences for the SAF, Singapore's inaction would have drawn criticisms from both Indonesia and Malaysia, demonstrating clearly how closely Singapore is intertwined with its immediate neighborhood, referred in regional security parlance as the 'ASEAN Kecil' or Small ASEAN sphere. Singapore's sensitivity to the external events is due to its interconnectedness to the world. With no natural resources or a large territorial space to survive on, Singapore has looked beyond the traditional hinterland of Malaysia and into the much larger, vibrant, lucrative and yet, volatile international community.

Key Thinking and Arrangements in Singapore's Hard Power Approach to Security

From the moment Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in August 1965, the ruling elites decided that military power had to be the key to ensuring its security. Hence, on Singapore's first day as an independent state, its Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, expressed this in the following terms :

... to survive, we must be sure that we cannot be just over-run or invaded by armies or knocked out by rockets. We must have the capacity to resist invasion and to call on friends who will be ready

to help us if we are invaded. In other words, we must have the capacity to prevent a successful invasion.¹¹

From that very moment, Singapore's leaders started thinking of 'hardening' Singapore by building its military capacity. In this, they adopted the Israeli model of a national conscript defense capacity, and this was undertaken with the help of Israel. Over years, the Republic succeeded in building an impressive defense capability. While initially, the defense concept was merely to deter aggressors, in what was described as a 'poisonous shrimp' strategy, over time, this was transformed into the strategy of a 'porcupine'.¹² The 'poison shrimp' strategy was based on the notion that a small state with respectable defense capability will be able to deter potential aggressors. However, this was viewed as limiting itself to the option of either surrender or suicide:

What happens if you step on a poisonous shrimp? He dies, but he will kill you. So if you notice him, you don't step on him. But a shrimp does not know how to surrender. You cannot threaten a shrimp. You can threaten a nation. If someone threatens to step on us, and our only alternatives are suicide or surrender, then there will be a very strong argument for surrender.¹³

Instead, once Singapore was able strengthen itself, there was a perceptible shift in its defense strategy, signaling its successful utilization of military power for obtaining security. According to Lee Hsien Loong, then the former Chief of Operations, Singapore Armed Forces, the Republic needed to adopt a defense posture that was capable of inflicting intolerable costs on potential enemies as well as to outlast attacks in actual combat. According to him :

So we need a policy which says, "if you come, I'll whack you, and I'll survive. This is a workable strategy. I may not completely destroy you, but you will have to pay a high price for trying to subdue me and you may still not succeed."¹⁴

¹¹ See, *The Mirror* (Singapore), 14 August 1965.

¹² For a detailed study of this, see Pak Shun Ng, *From 'Poisonous Shrimp' to 'Porcupine': An Analysis of Singapore's Defence Posture Change in the Early 1980s*, (Canberra: The Australian National University, The Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2005).

¹³ See "A Conversation with BG (Reservist) Lee Hsien Loong", *ASEAN Forecast*, Vol. 4, No. 10, 1984, p.164.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In view of the increasing options Singapore acquired over the year through strengthening its hard power capacity, Lee Hsien Loong argued:

We are not just a poisonous shrimp. We do not go on the basis that if somebody attacks us, we will hit them and will hurt them. But we will go on the basis that we will hit them and we will be around to pick up the pieces at the end.¹⁵

In an effort to provide a defense capability, essentially focusing on hard power, in the initial years, Singapore focused on a number of elements to achieve this. First, it adopted the system of national conscription whereby every able-bodied male of 18 years was eligible for military service. On the top of this, it also had a standing army, buttressed by a small air force and navy (see Table 1). Over the years, Singapore's home-grown defense capability has increased markedly and is impressive by regional, even Asian standards. Since the 1980s, the concept and strategy of 'Total Defense' has been adopted to address all aspects of security, adopting in effect, an approach of comprehensive security to 'harden' Singapore from all kinds of threats. Using models adopted from Sweden and Switzerland as well as Israel, today, Singapore has a highly developed hard power approach and strategy of securing itself.

Table 1 : Singapore Military Power

Singapore Armed Forces (SAF)

Total Armed Forces:

active - 60,500 (including 39,800 conscripts)

reserve - 213,800

¹⁵ Ibid.

Defense Budget:

1999 - \$4.2 billion

2000 - \$4.4 billion

Army: Singapore Army

active - 50,000

4 combat divisions

413 tanks

supporting artillery/air defense guns and missiles

Navy: Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN)

active - 4,500 (including 1,800 conscripts)

1 SSK submarine (3 more to be delivered)

24 patrol and coastal combatants

4 mine countermeasures

6 amphibious warfare ships

Air Force: Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF)

active - 6,000 (including 3,000 conscripts)

136 total combat aircraft including

6 fighter/ground attack squadrons of A-4s, F-16A/B/C/Ds and F-5s

20 armed helicopters

supporting air defense guns and missiles

Paramilitary Forces

active - 108,000+

Source : <http://www.cdi.org/issues/Asia/Singapore.html>

At the same time, the Republic has buttressed its national military power with various other arrangements to enhance its hard power security. This includes :

- a.. Border Military-Security Cooperation with its immediate neighbors, especially Malaysia and Indonesia.
- b. Intelligence Sharing with most ASEAN states as well as important strategic partners such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.
- c. Training and Sharing of Facilities, stemming from the lack of training grounds in the Republic. There is a extensive network in this regard with Singapore's training grounds found in the US, Australia, Taiwan, Thailand and Brunei.
- d. Joint Military Exercises with most countries from Southeast Asia and beyond, including the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and India.¹⁶

Over and above these arrangements, the Republic has also entered in a number of military agreements with important strategic partners. First, there is the investment in the Five Powers Defense Arrangement. In addition to Singapore, it involves the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia. This was part of the UK's decolonization exercise, whereby it retained a military role in the region even though its troops were withdrawn in 1971. This has served as an extremely useful training arrangement as well as providing ambiguous deterrence to potential adversaries. Singapore also had entered into many bilateral defense arrangements with countries such as the US, Australia, Israel, the UK and even Indonesia. Thus, in addition to developing national hard power, Singapore also 'borrowed' external hard power to enhance its security and since then, this has been adopted as an integral part of its defense strategy. All in all, over the years, there has been a clear emphasis on the development of hard power and this has served the Republic well.

¹⁶ For details, see Bilveer Singh, "Singapore's Management of its Security Problems", *Asia-Pacific Community*, No. 29, Summer 1985,.

It is one of the most secure small states in the world despite being located in what has been described as a ‘regional cockpit’ and a ‘zone of conflict’.

The Rise of Soft Power in Singapore’s Politics and Diplomacy

However, over the years, in line with changes in the region and beyond, the Republic has also began paying greater emphasis to soft power. In some ways, long before Joseph Nye emphasized the importance of soft power, Singapore was compelled to soften its hard power approach to obtaining security through what it referred to as the strategy of defense diplomacy. This developed in the context of the worsening relations of the Republic with its immediately neighbors, particularly Malaysia. Thus, in March 1988, Goh Chok Tong, the Defense Minister argued that a strong defense capability was important, at the same time, it must not alarm neighbors into mistaking that this was for aggressive purposes. Thus, while improving national defense was critical for survival, at the same time, there was a need to invest in good relations with the neighboring states through good diplomacy:

Channels of communications, whether formal or informal, must be preserved and maintained at all times...The SAF has to Endeavour to build up the existing links and relationships with our neighbors through greater bilateral and multilateral interactions and cooperation. It is important to establish and maintain as many channels of communications with our neighbors as possible, to be able to talk openly and frankly, even during times of uncertainty and difficulty, to establish a relationship of mutual respect and confidence.¹⁷

This was brought home by the realization that peace and stability cannot, alone be maintained by a strong defense capability. If anything, the concept, that one country’s

¹⁷ *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 27 March 1988.

security is another's insecurity, had to be addressed and this called for confidence and trust building measures, to buttress national security. According to Goh Chok Tong:

Deterrence alone cannot preserve or ensure that the peace and stability we enjoy continues. To have lasting peace, there must be common interest and understanding based on mutual respect, balanced forces, intertwined interests and shared destiny.¹⁸

If anything, Goh Chok Tong argued that there was immense danger for Singapore merely to emphasize on the hard aspect, namely, military, to achieve security:

A defense policy based only on deterrence will end up like two strangers staring at one another in the face. Each misreads the other's stare. Suspicious thoughts go through their minds, ending up very often in punches. The staring analogy teaches us that the force of arms alone cannot keep the peace.¹⁹

In many ways, the Singapore military and defense establishments have been investing in defense diplomacy and this can be argued is a critical soft power approach in defense to supplement its already strong but largely untested military capability. This is evident in the various exchange programmes as well as military assistance that the SAF has rendered to other countries, especially its neighbors in times of crisis such as earthquakes, floods and *tsunamis*.

Still, all being equal, there is a general perception that Singapore is lagging behind as far as soft power is concerned. For example, according to Koh Buck Song, a leading commentator and writer:

Singapore has done – and is doing – many of the right things in building up its 'hard power'. In economics, Singapore's ambition to make friends all over the world through free-trade pacts has been highly successful, with such landmark alliances as the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. In security, it punches above its weight.

¹⁸ Ibid, 2 December 1988.

¹⁹ Ibid.

It is when it comes to ‘soft power’ that Singapore can definitely do much more, and in at least three areas. First, a truly globalized city in this Internet age must be fully and freely plugged into the universe of ideas. But a remaining instinct for too-careful censorship and outmoded attitudes against forms of expression deemed to be non-mainstream is at odds with such an environment. A culture of tolerance is needed to nurture cultural products that project ‘soft power’.

Second, another key aspect of a conducive environment of expression is a robust intellectual life. The lack of any important, home-grown, independent current affairs journal is a serious gap in Singapore’s ingredients as a global city. Third, we have no Chow Yun Fat or Jackie Chan to penetrate Hollywood, but when Singapore artists exhibit or Singapore writers read or a Singapore movie is shown abroad, these are expressions of Singaporean ‘soft power’. Unfortunately, they do not happen every day, at say the least.²⁰

While Koh Buck Song’s observations are valid, there has at the same time been greater awareness among the political elites that more needed to be done to project Singapore’s ‘soft power’, especially at a time when globalization is cascading the world at breakneck speed. For instance, with reference to Israel’s challenges, the Singapore Foreign Minister, George Yeo observed in August 2006 that “it is clear now that force alone cannot solve all of Israel’s existential problems”.²¹ In other words, non-military, non-hard power approaches are equally necessary, something Tel Aviv has not been noted for in dealing with its opponents in the Middle East.

In this connection, speaking in Tel Aviv, Tan Tay Keong, the Director of the Singapore International Foundation emphasized the growing importance of ‘soft power’ in Singapore domestic and international politics, arguing that the Republic has to

²⁰ See Koh Buck Song, “The Trick that Singapore Missed”, *Today* (Singapore), 20 August 2003.

²¹ See Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the Harvard Project for Asian and International Relations 15th Annual Conference, 18 August 2006 at http://app.mfa.gov.sg/2006/press/view_press_print.asp?post_id=1783

consistently avail itself as a land of opportunities and all the imperatives that shaped her past policies, could be mobilized to do so. In this regard, he identified four elements in Singapore's soft power approach to development and security, namely, the focus on talent, emphasizing the importance of human capital and knowledge; trade, the life-blood of the Republic; the enabler to ensure the Republic could undertake the necessary tasks at a world-class level; and tolerance that would attract capable people to the Republic as well as induce Singaporeans to stay.²² This would indicate that soft power has grown in importance in Singapore even though it is not able to guarantee that a small state like Singapore will not be trouble free. One only need to scan the regional environment and analyze the worsening bilateral ties the Republic has developed with Thailand since October 2006 and with Indonesia since early 2007.

Conclusion: The Challenge of supplementing hard Power with soft Power

What is evidently clear is that as a small state, Singapore has invested heavily in hard power, building its military capacity to the point that it is able to defend itself. It is also able to leverage its various political, economic and social-cultural strengths internationally, leading to the recognition that as a small state it is able to 'punch above its weight' internationally. While its military power is recognized, having one of the most modern army, navy and air force, at the same time, there has been growing recognition of the need to invest in soft power. This has been brought about by the non-use of hard power in many arenas, the growing importance of soft power in the post-Cold War era as well as the ready usability of soft power compared to hard power in most international

²² See Marsha Weinstein and Eli Fried (eds.), *Soft Power Workshop – Lessons From Singapore*, (Tel Aviv: The Harold Hartog School of Government and Policy, S.Daniel Abraham Center for International and Regional Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2005), pp. 14-16.

transactions. However, given the various constraints, both domestic and international, and most important, being located in a region known for its instability, best evident in the rise of Jihadi Terrorism at present, it is highly likely that Singapore will continue to invest in hard power, especially military power while supplementing it with soft power. In short, as a small state, hard power will remain Singapore's mainstay and core resource in enhancing its security with soft power being applied when and where applicable.

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