

SINGAPORE'S DEFENSE POLICY:
ESSENTIAL OR EXCESSIVE?

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ABSTRACT

SINGAPORE'S DEFENSE POLICY: ESSENTIAL OR EXCESSIVE? by Major Yi-Jin Lee, 114 pages.

This research explores the ambivalence that surrounds Singapore's post-independence defense policy. On the one hand, Singapore's defense policy has complemented the nation's overall development with its robust efficacy and fiscal efficiency. However, the magnitude of the country's defense expenditure has also led to the occasional raised eyebrow. For example, Singapore's reported defense budget for 2009 was more than that of Malaysia's and Indonesia's put together, which some may find surprising given the relative sizes and populations of these three neighboring countries.

This research found that Singapore's decision to pursue a rigorous and generously-funded defense policy paid early dividends by reducing Singapore's initial vulnerability as a newly-independent nation. Since then, the role of Singapore's defense policy has evolved alongside changes in the security environment. Thus, while maintaining a credible deterrence will always remain the *raison d'être* of Singapore's defense policy, its contemporary manifestation pertains more directly to expanding Singapore's international influence through its synergistic impact on Singapore's economic and diplomatic instruments of national power.

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ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
FPDA	Five Power Defence Arrangements
SAF	Singapore Armed Forces
ZOPFAN	Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Singapore's continued survival as a nation appears fairly well assured for the foreseeable future. In fact, that would seem an understatement for a country that has made a habit out of collecting international accolades, from being the world's easiest place to do business,¹ to having the best sea² and air³ ports in Asia, to playing host to the world's first ever Formula 1 night race in 2008.

To be sure, accolades and awards represent just one measure of success and do not present a complete picture of a country's achievements--to say nothing of the failings and inherent tradeoffs that every country endures en route to its present state of development. In this regard, the Singapore model has certainly not been exempt from deserving criticism. Nevertheless, even the harshest critics of this island-nation express grudging admiration for the extraordinary material accomplishments that Singapore has garnered within a remarkably short period of time. More often than not, their criticisms are focused on issues such as media freedom, the nature of its electoral politics and the independence of its judicial system--all issues of significance, certainly, but arguably

¹Lesley Wroughton, "Singapore is Easiest Place for Business--World Bank," *Reuters*, 8 September 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/marketsNews/idUSN0829019220090909> (accessed 24 October 2009).

²Huw Harries, "2008 Asian Freight and Supply Chain Awards Press Release," 22 April 2008, <http://www.cargonewsasia.com/afsa/afsa2008.html> (accessed 24 October 2009).

³Greg Knowler, "2009 Asian Freight and Supply Chain Awards Press Release," 22 April 2009, <http://www.cargonewsasia.com/afsa/2009/> (accessed 24 October 2009).

issues that populate the apex of Maslow's hierarchy of needs as far as the welfare of Singaporeans is concerned.

Despite its formidable list of achievements today, however, Singapore's very existence as a nation-state was by no means a foregone conclusion at the time of its independence on 9 August 1965. Its dearth of natural resources and lack of a common identity among its immigrant population were among the host of uncomfortable geopolitical realities Singapore was faced with at the time, all of which did not seem to augur well for the young nation-state. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew, the Republic's first prime minister and the architect of Singapore's modern-day successes, prefaced his 1998 memoirs with this insight into the prevailing psyche amongst the Singapore leadership: "I thought our people should understand how vulnerable Singapore was and is, the dangers that beset us, and how we nearly did not make it."⁴ As it turns out, Singapore has done better than merely survive, as attested to by the sampling of accolades referred to above. And the story does not end there--spurred by a leadership that would not countenance prosperity at the expense of sovereignty, perhaps the most remarkable subplot of the Singapore success story is how it has achieved success on its own terms, without sacrificing its right to determine its own destiny.

Singapore's ability to overcome the difficult circumstances surrounding its birth in order to realize the measure of success it has attained today constitutes the backdrop for this thesis. Many commentators credit this achievement to a highly effective government, which effectively leveraged Singapore's strategic location along the Strait of

⁴Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), 8.

Malacca as a springboard towards becoming a diversified economic and developmental success. In this regard, this thesis will limit its focus to one specific facet of Singapore's developmental blueprint: the country's overarching defense policy, and in particular the relationship between its defense policy and the attainment of its national objectives. This is an admittedly narrow focus, since the Singapore story obviously encompasses a multitude of factors, of which a robust military defense has been but one element. Nevertheless, given that much of the country's success has been attributed to its leadership, the fact that its leadership has placed such a consistent emphasis on its defense policy would seem to suggest a profitable area of study from which to glean an understanding of the nation's success and psyche.

Definitions, Research Questions and Significance

Before proceeding further, it would be appropriate to clarify that for the purposes of this thesis, "defense policy" refers to the broad, national-level program undertaken by a country over a span of time to protect itself against its perceived threats. It enunciates the country's underlying rationale for defense, and often reflects that country's philosophy and orientation towards the military and the use of force. In focusing on Singapore's defense policy, then, this thesis will analyze the key impetuses behind Singapore's defense spending, which is an object of interest because of its apparent disproportion to the country's small size and population. For example, despite already having an armed force that has been described as "exceptional in Southeast Asia,"⁵ Singapore's defense budget for 2009 was still more than Malaysia's and Indonesia's put

⁵Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000), xix.

together--a fact which some find surprising (and perhaps even alarming) in view of the relative geographical footprints of the three neighboring countries.

The analysis will then attempt to answer the following primary research question: “could and should Singapore pursue a less expansive defense policy without compromising its national goals?” This can be further unpacked into two secondary questions, divided along temporal lines: (1) to what extent has Singapore’s defense policy been integral in serving its national objectives from independence to the present day; and (2) in view of its contemporary security environment, does Singapore need to maintain its current defense policy trajectory?

At first glance, it may be tempting to write off this thesis as an obsequious exercise by a Singaporean military professional, headed inexorably towards a foregone conclusion. After all, in light of the repeated assertions by Singapore’s leaders that its defense capabilities have been a key catalyst for the country’s continued viability and economic success, how could an evaluation of Singapore’s defense policy paint anything other than a peachy portrait, considering the city-state’s indubitable record of successes?

Such a characterization would be overly simplistic, however, and ultimately misses the point about the aim of this research. The fact that Singapore exceeded most of its developmental expectations at birth does suggest that at least a few good decisions were made along the way. To the extent that this is true within the realms of defense and security, those reflections should figure amongst this thesis’ conclusions. That said, this thesis has its sights set on a deeper level of analysis. Noting that Singapore has succeeded as a thriving city-state with a consistently robust defense policy is one thing; it is a different matter altogether to establish a causal relationship between the two. Could the

fact that Singapore escaped annexation during its earliest, most vulnerable years be due more to good fortune than to design? Perhaps it was the evolving external environment, for example, with the rigid strictures imposed by the Cold War on the one hand fused with the growing importance of global institutions and strengthening international norms of sovereignty on the other, which provided the cosseted conditions conducive to Singapore's economic miracle. We will never know for sure, but this thesis will search for insights that could be of value to the numerous developing nation-states that look to Singapore's success as a possible model for their own.

In the same vein, could it be that the billions of dollars Singapore has spent on defense would have been more productively invested in other aspects of its economy? While the "other" aspects of the Singapore economy will not be addressed by this thesis, the issue of possible macro-level inefficiencies arising from defense allocation decisions will be. This is an especially pertinent question going forward, not just for disciples of the Singapore model, but indeed for Singapore itself. The fact is, while Singapore's circumstances have altered drastically since independence, the attention paid to its defense has not, as evinced by the country's contemporary defense budgetary trends.

That Singapore can probably afford its current pattern of expenditure does not render these questions any less relevant, either. The international environment is not inert, and extraneous factors may well necessitate abrupt changes in national policy. The U.S. sub-prime mortgage crisis in 2008, for example, precipitated a global financial crisis that compelled many countries to reexamine their fiscal priorities. In Singapore's case, this led the government to dip into the country's reserves for the first time in 2009 to fund economic stabilization measures, even as the country ran its largest ever budget deficit

that year.⁶ Interestingly, Singapore's defense budget at the time did not appear to be adversely affected by these developments, with parliament approving what was then its largest defense budget to date in absolute terms.⁷ Nevertheless, it remains to be seen what impact, if any, a sustained economic slowdown might have on Singapore's resource allocation decisions. As such, this thesis will explore how Singapore's unwavering defense posture continues to serve its national objectives, in order to evaluate the utility of continuing along the present trajectory of defense expenditure.

Caveats and Assumptions

While this thesis is concerned with resource allocation, it is *not* intended as a micro-examination of Singapore's defense establishment. It will not, for example, attempt to evaluate individual components within its defense budget. In part, this is due to the paucity of such highly sensitive information for analysis. More important is the fact that even if such information was available, it would arguably contribute little towards answering the primary research question. After all, to say that greater cost-effectiveness is preferred to less would be to state a truism that could apply to any individual defense program, without getting to the crux of whether that program should even have been pursued in the first place. Instead, by using Singapore's overall defense expenditure as a proxy for the country's commitment to defense, this thesis will analyze Singapore's

⁶Ian Timberlake, "Singapore's First Dip into Reserves may Fall Short: Analysts," *AsiaOne*, 23 January 2009, <http://www.asiaone.com/Business/News/My%2BMoney/Story/A1Story20090123-116742.html> (accessed 17 May 2010).

⁷Ministry of Finance, Singapore, "Budget Highlights: Financial Year 2009," 22 January 2009, http://www.mof.gov.sg/budget_2009/speech_toc/downloads/FY2009_Budget_Highlights.pdf (accessed 17 May 2010).

defense policy at a macro-level, in order to determine how effective the Singapore establishment *at large* has been over the years with regard to its allocation of resources to defense at the exclusion of other areas, insofar as advancing Singapore's national objectives is concerned.

Two assumptions are necessary to sustain this flow of analysis. The first pertains to the very concept of a "Singapore establishment." For this thesis to be able to speak in general terms about the vision and paradigms of the Singaporean leadership over the course of almost half a century of independence, there is an implicit assumption of leadership continuity over the intervening period.

By taking this assumption, this thesis does not mean to imply that Singapore's post-independence leadership has exhibited a stagnant, monolithic character; indeed, Singapore's success story has been one of remarkable transformation amidst a fluid international environment, which could not have been possible without there being some corresponding degree of dynamism resident in its leadership. Yet, the fact that independent Singapore has only ever been governed by a single political party to date, and that Lee Kuan Yew, at age 87, remains an influential figure in his son and current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's cabinet today, suggest that there have been stabilizing elements within Singapore's leadership philosophy that have presided over the country's road to success. Defense is certainly one area that has featured consistently at the forefront of the leadership's considerations over the past 45 years, and the aggregate of these facts is what undergirds the validity of this assumption for the purposes of this analysis.

The second assumption pertains to the validity of using Singapore's defense budget as a barometer for the country's defense policy at large. In order for this to be a plausible proxy relationship, Singapore's defense establishment must be assumed to be reasonably efficient, such that any leakages to the system do not negate the benefit of any increase in resource allocation. In other words, every additional dollar spent on defense should translate to a qualitative increase in output (even if it does reflect diminishing returns at some point), as opposed to being frittered away by corruption and other systemic inefficiencies. Only then can the size of Singapore's defense budget be a reliable indicator of the country's true commitment to its own defense.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this assumption has merit, in that what Singapore does spend on defense is more often than not spent wisely. In October 2003, for example, when Singapore announced its shortlist of fighter aircraft to replace its ageing A-4 Skyhawk fleet, the news became the subject of keen international interest despite the relatively small size of the contract. According to an *Aviation Week* report on the announcement, Singapore's military is widely regarded as a reference customer and "a model of cost-effectiveness," with acquisition decisions that are seen as transparent and well-considered.⁸ While one should be careful about drawing too many conclusions purely on the basis of such anecdotal evidence, the point being made here is that the Singapore defense establishment appears to have a rigorous and internationally-recognized mechanism in place to regulate the expenditure of funds. With this assumption in hand, this thesis can turn its attention to the decisions that determine the

⁸Richard Aboulafia, "Fighter Makers Reassess Options," *Aviation Week*, 1 March 2004, http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/generic/story_generic.jsp?channel=awst&id=news/2004sb02.xml (accessed 26 February 2010).

country's appropriations towards defense, and how these in turn affect the national interest.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, it is far easier to launch an *ipso facto* critique of a nation's defense policy when its deficiencies have already been laid bare by reality's grim spotlight. We can look at Kuwait in 1991, for instance, as a cautionary tale for states who consider their economic prowess and interdependent relationships a suitable substitute for effective self-defense. At the other end of the spectrum, the bleak conditions endured by the average North Korean or Myanmar citizen remind us that military considerations should serve rather than lead the development of national policies, and that a country's defense expenditure cannot in itself guarantee its security. In this regard, Singapore's ostensibly smooth ride to success has made it relatively difficult to draw causal linkages amongst the myriad factors that have played contributory roles.

Recognizing these challenges, this thesis will tackle these issues with a return to first principles. In particular, chapter 2 will begin by examining academic theories of why conflicts happen and what actions states can take to improve their security. This objective framework will be complemented by a selective empirical study of how states in general have approached the issue of self-defense, to provide real-world examples of how these theories have been put into action and what some of the resulting consequences were.

To establish the appropriate context for the study, chapter 2 will also paint a picture of Singapore's regional security context, as well as identify the paradigms that have shaped Singapore's defense expenditure since independence, such as perceived threats to its early existence, and the persisting Realist conviction among its leaders that a

strong military is a prerequisite for economic growth and the maintenance of sovereignty. Building on these foundations, the analysis in chapter 4 will then examine the role that Singapore's defense policy has played in advancing the national goals embedded within those paradigms. Chapter 5 will then conclude by assessing the sustainability and desirability, from Singapore's perspective, of maintaining its current pattern of defense expenditure.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section sets out to establish an objective framework of analysis for Singapore's defense policy, by examining the key theoretical reasons for interstate conflict as they pertain to a country in Singapore's situation, as well as the solutions offered up by the academic and empirical realms for a given state's defense problem.

To put this framework into the proper perspective, the second section will draw on primary and secondary source materials, as well as written commentaries on Singapore's development, to establish the context for modern-day Singapore's defense policy. In particular, this context has been defined by Singapore's regional security environment, as epitomized by the characteristics of and relationships within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as the unique historical experiences and security paradigms that have shaped Singapore's defense expenditure since independence.

Section 1: Theoretical and Empirical Underpinnings

This thesis will draw on three areas of scholarship from which to build a theoretical basis for its analysis. The first is the study of sources of conflict. Given the primacy of deterrence in Singapore's defense policy, an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of interstate conflict is critical to objectively evaluate the effectiveness of Singapore's approach towards defense spending. In particular, this thesis will examine

contributions by international relations theory, political science and economics towards the study of why states go to war.

The second area explores the security options available to small states. A considerable body of literature exists to address how small states can best manage their vulnerability in the international system, whether it is through the relationships they cultivate, or the way they allocate their limited resources. It is important to note, however, that the utility of such prescriptions is usually limited by several caveats--most notable, perhaps, is their inherently subjective nature, owing to the unique contextual frame that inevitably looms large over the development of such theories. Indeed, no two countries are exactly alike in their geographical circumstances, socio-cultural norms, or stages of development, so much so that the very definition of “small states” is itself contentious and highly situation dependent. Nevertheless, these caveats do not negate the usefulness of such theories as a set of normative lenses through which we can gain an enhanced understanding of Singapore’s defense policy choices.

The third area draws primarily on empirical studies of defense expenditures. How much a government spends on its military has always been a divisive issue, particularly for states with competing domestic socio-economic concerns. In this regard, Singapore’s defense spending patterns, especially during its nascent days of independence when unemployment, mortality rates and ethnic tensions ran high, appeared to defy the conventional wisdom. This thesis will examine some of these empirical studies and their conclusions en route to determining why Singapore ultimately proved to be an exception to the norm.

Sources of Conflict

When Clausewitz described war as “merely the continuation of policy by other means,”¹ he was drawing attention to a fact that is often obscured by the destructive effects of state-on-state violence--that at the root of all the blood, smoke and devastation, lays the seemingly innocuous seed of political purpose. Indeed, scholars across a variety of disciplines have applied their respective tools of analysis towards understanding this nebulous concept of “political purpose.” What factors within the calculations of statesmen lead them to select the instrument of war for the attainment of their ends? International relations theorists and political scientists, unsurprisingly, have much to say on this matter, much of which is divided amongst the Realist, Liberal and Constructivist schools of thought. Economists, too, make a significant contribution through their study of incentives, rational actors and resource allocation. Still others have attempted to look beyond political motivations to consider if specific circumstances predispose certain states to conflict over others.

A comprehensive treatment of all of the disparate analytical tracks is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis. Nor would it guarantee a productive journey towards understanding Singapore’s unique approach to defense policy. Instead, this thesis will focus on just three strands of academic analyses to frame the discussion on the sources of conflict, which together present a relevant sampling of the prevailing theoretical logic on the sources of war as they pertain to the Singaporean example.

¹Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. *Carl von Clausewitz: On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87.

Through their separate studies on the influence of geography on the security paradigm of states, Colin Gray and Bernard Loo collectively provide the first strand of analysis for this thesis. Gray argues that geography shapes the formulation of strategy in three ways. At the geopolitical level, the location of states relative to one another determines each state's perception of its political space, which is fundamental to its concept of statehood. At the military-strategic level, the size and location of states provide the context for strategy, while at the lower operational-tactical level, physical geography influences how military decision-makers determine the nature of operations and desired force structures.² Building on Gray's analysis, Loo posits that these geographical factors in turn have a direct bearing on the probability of interstate conflict because they feed into each state's calculation of how far military force can be used to impose their will on other states (and conversely, the extent to which a state feels vulnerable to the threat or use of military force).³ Given the regularity with which its leaders have cited Singapore's small size and lack of strategic depth as a critical vulnerability, this strand of research should offer valuable insight into the origins of Singapore's defense policy.

A closer examination of this policy is then proffered through the lens crafted by Geoffrey Blainey, who revisits the Realist emphasis on the balance of power in determining the prevalence of interstate conflict. By analyzing the causes of peace in conjunction with the causes of war, Blainey argues that the prime determinant of conflict

²Colin Gray, "Inescapable Geography," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2 (June 1999): 165-166.

³Bernard Loo, "Geography and Strategic Stability," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 2003): 162-167.

is the way national leaders perceive the distribution of power between states (as opposed to how that power may be distributed in reality), as well as their perception of the prizes and penalties of using military force to attempt a redistribution of that power.⁴ Thus, a clearly lopsided balance of power in itself seldom leads to war, as there would be strong incentives for the weaker state to capitulate in order to stave off the threat of violence. Instead, war is more likely to occur when both parties have conflicting estimates of their respective bargaining power (to include military power), which precludes the peaceful resolution of conflict by either side backing down. According to Blainey, each state's assessment of relative bargaining power is in turn shaped by seven main factors: (1) military strength; (2) predictions of how other states would behave in the event of war; (3) perceptions of internal unity; (4) perceptions of prosperity and of the ability to sustain war; (5) the memory of past sufferings of war; (6) nationalism and ideology; and (7) the personality and mental qualities of the leaders in charge.⁵

Blainey's analysis provides a useful frame for evaluating the effectiveness of Singapore's defense spending, because the outcomes that its defense policy has engendered can be compared against the seven factors listed above. For example, investing in a strong national army could plausibly impact at least three of the seven factors directly (perception of military strength, behavior in response to war, and internal unity). By affecting a potential adversary's calculations in this way, a state's defense policy could enhance the effectiveness of its deterrence and thus preserve its chances for

⁴Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 113-122.

⁵Blainey, 123.

peace. The extent to which Singapore has been successful in this regard will be examined in detail in chapter 4.

This thesis also draws on Jack Hirshleifer's work on conflict theory, which applies economic logic to a field more commonly associated with political science. In his book *The Dark Side of the Force*, Hirshleifer observed that "There are two main methods of making a living . . . the way of production and exchange versus the way of predation and conflict."⁶ Three factors in particular underlie the tradeoff between peaceful production and forceful appropriation: the opportunities, preferences and perceptions of the state.⁷ In the economic jargon, the three factors could be said to collectively comprise a given state's "optimization function" when deciding between what Hirshleifer calls the way of Ronald Coase and the way of Niccolo Machiavelli.⁸

Preferences designate the outcomes that a state desires. Where these outcomes or interests are directly opposed to those of another state, there is a source of friction and the accompanying prospect of conflict. Opportunities pertain to the way the state can bring about its preferred outcomes. Here, Hirshleifer defers to microeconomic analysis with his assertion that a state will lean towards either conflict or productive exchange, depending on which is more profitable on the margin. Finally, perceptions, which encompass domestic politics and political psychology, play a big role in shaping a state's assessment

⁶Jack Hirshleifer, *The Dark Side of the Force: Economic Foundations of Conflict Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

⁷Hirshleifer, 13-14.

⁸Hirshleifer, 10-11. "According to Coase's Theorem, people will never pass up an opportunity to cooperate by means of mutually advantageous exchange. What might be called Machiavelli's Theorem says that no one will ever pass up an opportunity to gain a one-sided advantage by exploiting another party."

of its opportunities and of other states' preferences. In this latter regard, it is worth noting that Hirshleifer concurs with Blainey on the importance of perceptions as a source of conflict.

Although Singapore is not generally regarded as a threat to its neighbors by way of military aggression, Hirshleifer's model nevertheless offers at least two theoretical links between Singapore's defense policy and its effective security. First, by examining Singapore's preferences (read: desired national outcomes) vis-à-vis those of its neighbors, we can analyze the degree to which they are compatible or mutually exclusive. In this way, Hirshleifer's model allows us to scrutinize some of the assumptions that motivate Singapore's defense spending, such as claims of Singapore's inherent vulnerability within Southeast Asia. Second, Singapore's deterrence goals can be usefully reframed, in Hirshleifer's terms, as its ability to shape other states' perceptions of the opportunities available to them. Developing a strong military, for example, would raise the perceived marginal cost of the Machiavellian approach for a potential adversary, as might a solid military alliance with a regional or global hegemon. Likewise, a state could seek to increase the marginal benefit of a Coase-ian approach in its interstate relationships, for example by promoting economic interdependence. Chapter 4 will juxtapose these theoretical linkages with Singapore's demonstrated actions to further evaluate the efficacy of Singapore's defense policy.

Security Options for Small States

The overarching goal of this second subsection is to lay out a menu of defense policy options that conventional wisdom dictates is available to states such as Singapore, as a basis for understanding what Singapore might have done or could do differently. In

this regard, perhaps the biggest challenge is that there seems no suitable measure of Singapore's place in the world that would facilitate the identification of "similar" states. Indeed, this problem of definition seems particularly acute for smaller states. Academics can generally agree on which countries comprise the league of "big powers" at any point in history, with the possible exception of a handful of states that sit on the margin. However, while a considerable body of literature exists on such phenomena as "small states," "micro-states," "mini states" and "weak states," broad consensus on how best to gauge a particular country's place in the international system--whether by geographical size, population or GDP, for example--has so far remained elusive. Iver Neumann and Sieglinde Gstohl probably summed it up best: "small states are defined by what they are not."⁹

Fortunately, there is some consensus over the actions states can take to improve their security when they exist outside the league of "big powers," which effectively diminishes the importance of the normative distinctions between small, mini, and micro for the purpose of our analysis. Broadly, states can either seek greater engagement with the rest of the world, or less of it. Included in the former category are the signing of military alliances (whether regional or extra-regional), participating actively in international institutions, and building the bonds of economic interdependence, while the latter typically refers to the pursuit of neutrality.

This analysis will not describe what these mechanisms are and how they work; rather, it will focus on identifying the broad schemas that guide states towards the

⁹Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, Sieglinde Gstohl, and Jessica Beyer, eds., *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 6.

selection of particular mechanisms over others for the enhancement of their security. This analysis also recognizes that neither strategy of engagement nor disengagement necessarily predisposes states towards spending more or less on their defense. Other factors, such as geopolitical circumstances and temporal threat assessments, are certainly inextricable from the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the considerations that this subsection attempts to identify should figure significantly in a state's defense spending equation, and warrant closer examination as part of a holistic review of Singapore's defense policy.

As alluded to above, attempting to pin down Singapore's place in the international system may be an unproductive exercise in view of the subjectivities inherent in the associated labels. What would be of more value would be to understand the relevant factor(s) that set Singapore--and any other state, for that matter--apart from its contemporaries in the international community with regard to the classification of states. Laurent Goetschel got to the heart of the matter when he observed that all such classification criteria were generally only useful to the degree that they were able to indicate a given state's ability and propensity to influence affairs beyond its immediate environment. Homing in on this concept of influence, Goetschel developed a working definition of small states as those with relatively little influence on their international environment, and whose autonomy with respect to this environment is relatively small.¹⁰

Like Goetschel, Jean-Marc Rickli understood the concept of small in international relations to be both relative and contextual. In his analysis of the military policy

¹⁰Laurent Goetschel, ed., *Small States inside and outside the European Union: Interests and Policies* (Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 14-15.

strategies of European small states, Rickli characterized small states' security policies as attempts to minimize or compensate for this deficit in influence. In this regard, he noted that small states are generally faced with two choices: they could either seek to preserve their autonomy through the pursuit of neutrality, or they could attempt to maximize their influence by seeking membership into an alliance.¹¹ Alliances may offer a disproportionate security benefit to smaller states, who would contribute less for the same amount of shared security.¹² However, in the extreme, a small state may be forced to abdicate all foreign policy independence to the desires of the larger members of the alliance, since influence within an alliance is usually proportionate to a given state's contributions. According to Rickli, what a state chooses is shaped by its unique reaction to the international environment--to include a nation's tradition, values, attitudes, habits, symbols, achievements, and so on. Rickli termed this menagerie of factors as a state's "strategic culture," which determines how that state adapts to the environment and solves problems with respect to the threat and the use of force.¹³

Dan Reiter's learning theory offers another take on why states do or do not enter into alliances. In contrast to traditional Realist bandwagoning and balance of threat theories, Reiter postulates that alliance-formation at any given point in time is less dependent on levels of external threat, and more on the formative historical experiences

¹¹Jean-Marc Rickli, "European Small States' Military Policies after the Cold War: From Territorial to Niche Strategies," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 21, no. 3 (September 2008): 308-310.

¹²Michael Handel, "Weak States in the International System," in *Small States in International Relations*, ed. Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, Sidglinde Gstohl, and Jessica Beyer (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 191.

¹³Rickli, 311.

of the states in question. Drawing on empirical evidence, Reiter's theory puts forth an enticingly simple argument: a state that has experienced (whether by active participation or mere observation) success in either alliances or neutrality is considerably more likely to pursue such a strategy, while an experience of failure will conversely encourage a different approach.¹⁴

Reiter's learning theory dovetails neatly with Rickli's ideas on strategic culture. Even during Singapore's nascent days of independence, it arguably already had a well defined strategic culture in place, informed by a gamut of historical experiences at both the national as well as personal levels of its first generation of leaders. This fact serves to reinforce the highly contextual nature of this particular thread of analysis. Thus, by juxtaposing Reiter's and Rickli's theories with the pertinent characteristics of Singapore's regional environment as they are laid out in the second section of this chapter, these complementary threads of analysis should enhance our understanding of why Singapore went down the defense policy path it did, and whether it might have been better off considering a different route.

Empirical Findings on Defense Expenditures

States that spend a significant proportion of their GDPs on defense seldom find themselves in the press for the right reasons. Typically, the negative attention is focused less on their levels of defense expenditure per se, but on the tradeoffs these states accept in order to pay for their tanks and warships. The United Nations Committee on

¹⁴Dan Reiter, "Learning, Realism, and Alliances: The Weight of the Shadow of the Past," in *Small States in International Relations*, ed. Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, Sidglinde Gstohl, and Jessica Beyer (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 231.

Development Planning, for example, described the worldwide expenditure on national defense activity as “the single and most massive obstacle to development.”¹⁵ Indeed, this strongly-worded claim appears to be backed by a preponderance of empirical evidence, with high levels of defense spending generally coinciding with dismal performances among less developed countries in increasing growth and reducing poverty. Why, then, do some states invest so much more in defense than others, even during periods of relative peace? And who is really better off as a result? These questions are certainly pertinent to this analysis, given the seemingly disproportionate amounts that Singapore spends on defense for a country of its size. In particular, this thesis will examine two categories of postulated causal linkages that have arisen from several largely empirical studies: the factors that appear to shape defense spending, as well as the relationship between defense spending and national development.

Competing theories persist on the factors that shape how much a state spends on its defense. This is not surprising given the diversity within the international community, whose membership and social hierarchy remain in a state of perpetual flux. For this reason, scholars such as Sandler and Hartley¹⁶ and Looney and Frederiksen¹⁷ preach caution to those attempting to discern any form of generalized defense spending patterns from amongst the myriad states.

¹⁵Richard Jolly, *Disarmament and World Development* (Michigan: Pergamon Press, 1978), xi.

¹⁶Todd Sandler, and Keith Hartley, *The Economics of Defense* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 62.

¹⁷Robert E. Looney, and Peter C. Frederikson, “The Effect of Declining Military Influence on Defense Budgets in Latin America,” *Armed Forces and Society* 26, no. 3 (2000): 437-449.

In an attempt to control for the many context-dependent influences on defense spending, Benjamin Goldsmith explored an extensive data set comprising over 200 countries from between 1886 to 1989. He observed that for states not embroiled in an interstate conflict, factors within their domestic environments--such as economic growth, level of wealth, and regime type--were more strongly correlated with the proportion of national income spent on defense as compared to external factors such as regional tensions or alliance membership. According to Goldsmith, the greater significance of domestic factors reflected the fact that for non-autocratic states, resource allocations are primarily a political process. And among the competing domestic factors, it stands to reason that a state with a robust economy would have a greater capacity for defense spending, and further that a wealthy state would have a greater incentive to invest in security as it has that much more to lose.¹⁸

William Nordhaus, John Oneal, and Bruce Russett provide a useful counterpoint to Goldsmith's analysis by focusing on the impact of external factors on a state's military expenditures. Examining 165 countries in the post-World War II period, Nordhaus, Oneal and Russett argue that as far as external factors are concerned, a state's assessment of the probability of a "fatal, militarized dispute" is the single most important determinant of defense spending, even more so than the state's actual involvement in interstate conflict, or the military expenditures of surrounding friends or foes.¹⁹

¹⁸Benjamin E. Goldsmith, "Bearing the Defense Burden, 1886-1989," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no. 5 (October 2003): 551-572.

¹⁹William Nordhaus, John R. Oneal, and Bruce Russett, "The Effects of the National Security Environment on Military Expenditures, 1950-2000," (Conflict and Cooperation Conference, Ford Motor Company Center for Global Citizenship, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 7-8 November, 2008).

Having considered the factors that are likely to influence how much a state spends on its security, it is also important to examine what impact a state's defense spending is likely to have on its overall development, with a view to understanding the extent to which Singapore's defense policy is consistent with its broader national objectives.

On the surface, the portents do not look good for advocates of aggressive defense spending. Saadat Deger and Ron Smith analyzed military expenditure and economic growth data from 50 countries (including Singapore) during the period 1965-1973, and found that although military expenditure had a small positive effect on growth through modernization effects, this was outweighed by a larger negative effect on savings and investment.²⁰ Similar conclusions about the inverse relationship between a state's defense spending and its economic performance have been reported by several others including Robert Gilpin²¹, Barry Posen, Stephen Van Evera²² and Robert W. DeGrasse Jr.²³

²⁰Saadat Deger, and Ron Smith, "Military Expenditure and Growth in Less Developed Countries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 2 (June 1983): 344-347. Besides Singapore, the other countries in the study were Argentina, Brazil, Burma, Ceylon, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, South Vietnam, Spain, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Egypt, Venezuela, Algeria, Chad, Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Libya, Somalia and Saudi Arabia.

²¹Robert Gilpin, *War & Change in International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 162.

²²Barry Posen, and Stephen Van Evera, "Defense Policy and the Reagan Administration: Departure from Containment," *International Security* 8, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 43.

²³Robert W. DeGrasse Jr., *Military Expansion, Economic Decline: The Impact of Military Spending on U.S. Economic Performance* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1983), 47-48.

Although their analyses encompass different regions and time periods, there seems a broad consensus that excessive military spending monopolizes capital that the private sector would otherwise use more efficiently--a phenomenon that economists refer to as “crowding out.” John Feffer’s recent study on South Korean military spending was no more sanguine, despite the fact that South Korea’s significant defense expenditure over the past 20 years has coincided with the country’s informal coronation as one of the four “Asian Tigers” during the 1990s. Feffer contends that non-defense investments by both the government and the private sector have consistently yielded better returns, while military spending by contrast has led to misguided investments, greater waste and inefficiency, inflationary pressures, increased debt through foreign purchases, and a growing tax burden.²⁴ He also raised the possibility that South Korea’s actions could spark an expensive, yet futile, arms race in Northeast Asia, one which South Korea cannot hope to win against the likes of Japan, China and Russia.²⁵

In truth, notwithstanding the empirical doom and gloom, it is by no means a theoretical formality that military spending should equate to bad news for the economy at large. Although the crowding out of the private sector is a clear possibility, it is also just as plausible that judicious levels of military spending can boost employment, infrastructure development, and provide for both scientific and technological spin-offs that spur economic activity in non-military sectors. Indeed, as Jonathan Kirshner argues,

²⁴John Feffer, “Ploughshares into Swords: Economic Implications of South Korean Military Spending,” *Korea Economic Institute Academic Paper Series* 4, no. 2 (February 2009): 3-5.

²⁵Feffer, 7.

the net effect of military spending is ultimately influenced by such factors as the quality of a state's leadership, its level of development and its position in the business cycle.²⁶

Perhaps what is most germane to this discussion is not whether defense expenditure is better than non-defense expenditure, but whether a country would be better off diverting what it currently spends on defense towards other facets of the economy. In this regard, Emile Benoit cautioned against the temptation to compare existing defense programs with their "optimum substitutes" instead of their "objective *probable* substitutes" [emphasis added], when attempting to assess the true opportunity costs of such programs.²⁷ Taking this a step further, Steve Chan concluded that the direct impact of military spending on economic growth varies significantly across countries, depending on the extent to which the military is integrated into a country's economy as well as the mechanisms available for redistribution of resources in the event of a reduction in defense spending.²⁸ In other words, while the empirical data and aggregate trends are valuable in suggesting possible causal relationships between military spending and economic growth, care must be exercised in extrapolating these conclusions for use in individual case studies. Thus, for the purposes of evaluating Singapore's well-resourced defense policy, the experiences of myriad countries over several generations ultimately pale in significance to the domestic considerations governing the allocation of resources

²⁶Jonathan Kirshner, "Political Economy in Security Studies After the Cold War," *Cornell University Peace Studies Program*, Occasional Paper no. 20 (April 1997): 21.

²⁷Emile Benoit, *Growth and Defense in Developing Countries* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1978), 276.

²⁸Steve Chan, "Grasping the Peace Dividend: Some Propositions on the Conversions of Swords into Ploughshares," *Mershon International Studies Review* 39 (1995): 81-83.

in Singapore. Chapter 4 will examine these in conjunction with Singapore's security paradigms as identified in the proceeding section.

Section 2: Singapore's Defense Policy Evolution

Having laid out the analytical tools for understanding the roots of interstate conflict as well as some possible mitigating measures, it is timely to establish the appropriate context to ensure a focused and fruitful discussion of Singapore's defense policy. As highlighted earlier in the chapter, every state inherits a unique geopolitical endowment. Furthermore, the way in which the circumstances external to its boundaries interact with its internal political mechanisms is also prone to enormous variance, as factors such as population size, political ideology, culture, and geography inevitably come into play. This has certainly contributed to the breadth of literature on international relations theory, and the corresponding richness of the field. At the same time, however, it is also the reason that such theories are commonly criticized for their limited applicability across cultures and milieus. The preceding section has thus filtered out a sampling of those theories that are most applicable to answering the primary research question, for reasons that should become clearer as the historical context and analytical parameters are established in the rest of this chapter.

This section moves away from the abstraction of generalizing theories, and zooms in to provide two additional levels of resolution. The first identifies the schemas and interactive norms that have come to characterize Singapore's regional security environment, as epitomized by ASEAN's evolutionary journey. The second level focuses specifically on Singapore, and examines in particular the interaction between external circumstances and internal mechanisms, as codified in two security paradigms that have

played critical roles in shaping the development of Singapore's defense policy for as long as the country has been independent.

It is important to reiterate that the aim of this thesis is not to analyze the evolution of ASEAN, nor is it to offer critiques of the Singapore decision-making apparatus. Rather, it is an evaluation of the city-state's defense policy in terms of how it serves and continues to serve its national objectives. Such an evaluation would be impossible without an understanding of the circumstances which that policy was developed in response to, as well as the manner in which that policy has evolved over the years. To that end, this section will endeavor to present the relevant facts in as plain and objective a fashion as possible, to provide the context for the analysis in chapter 4.

Singapore's Regional Security Environment

Singapore's regional security environment is defined by a host of diverse influences, including geography, ethnicity and international politics. Sitting in the heart of Southeast Asia, afloat within the Indonesian archipelagic bowl and an erstwhile extension of the Malaysian peninsula, Singapore's domestic development has always responded to the region's unique cultural and colonial heritage, as well as to the political machinations that accompany its membership within ASEAN. The sources of external influences are by no means confined to the immediate locale, either--the region's abundant natural resources, in addition to its criticality as a conduit between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, has ensured the continued interest of foreign powers, a fact which has yielded both risk and opportunity to the states that sit astride its waterways.

This subsection will use the evolution of ASEAN as a frame of reference for Singapore's post-independence regional security environment. The reason for this

narrowed focus is two-fold: first, given that ASEAN was formed in 1967, just two years after Singapore achieved its independence from Malaysia, the association's time in existence overlays neatly with this thesis' period of interest. Second, and more important, Singapore's foreign and security policies are deeply embedded within the fabric of ASEAN. Indeed, the reasons for the association's formation are closely intertwined with the circumstances surrounding Malaysia's and Singapore's independence and cannot be considered in isolation. As such, ASEAN's evolving political and security dynamic constitutes an appropriate proxy through which we can glean a useful understanding of Singapore's regional security context. This understanding is in turn crucial for an objective analysis of the security options available to Singapore at the time of its independence.

ASEAN was established in August 1967 when Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines Singapore and Thailand signed the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok, Thailand. At the time, interstate relations in the region were tense. As the post-colonial era gradually took form, Southeast Asian states were involved in a number of bilateral and multilateral disputes with each other in the 1960s, including a territorial dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines, as well as the outbreak of small-scale armed hostilities during Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* (confrontation) with the newly-independent Malaysia and Singapore. There had also been several abortive attempts to establish a regional grouping, all of which failed for a variety of reasons that could be traced back to mutual distrust.²⁹

²⁹The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, or SEATO, was established in 1954, but was widely viewed as a U.S.-led containment strategy that did not serve the interests of regional countries. Comprising nine members, but with only the Philippines and Thailand from amongst the Southeast Asian countries, it was eventually disbanded in

According to Shaun Narine³⁰ and Amitav Acharya,³¹ its founders thus envisaged ASEAN primarily as an instrument for the prevention and resolution of disputes among its members. Indeed, this was reflected in the norms enshrined in ASEAN's founding documents, which included the renunciation of the threat or use of force, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, mutual respect for territorial integrity, and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter.³²

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the ASEAN states never gravitated towards a military alliance, despite the fact that the security guarantees afforded by the U.S. and Britain up until that point were in jeopardy with the seemingly imminent departures of the two powers from the region. Politically, the conditions were not conducive for a regional alliance, with recent disputes contributing to an atmosphere of lingering mistrust. This lack of political will was evident at the first ASEAN Summit meeting in 1976, when ASEAN's leaders explicitly rejected the alliance option. Coming

1977. The Association of Southeast Asia, or ASA, was formed in 1961 comprising Malaysia (then the Malaya Federation), Thailand and Philippines, but it had fallen apart by 1963 due to a territorial dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines over Sabah (North Borneo). Finally, MAPHILINDO, comprising Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia, was initiated in 1963 but was suffocated shortly thereafter by the ensuing *Konfrontasi* between Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as the unresolved dispute over Sabah.

³⁰Shaun Narine, "ASEAN and the Management of Regional Security," *Pacific Affairs* 71, no. 2 (1998): 196.

³¹Amitav Acharya, "Regional Military-Security Cooperation in the Third World: A Conceptual Analysis of the Relevance and Limitations of ASEAN," *Journal of Peace Research* 29, no. 1 (1992): 10-11.

³²The ASEAN Secretariat, "About ASEAN--Overview," from the official website of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, http://www.aseansec.org/about_ASEAN.html (accessed 1 February 2010).

on the heels of the Communist victory in Indo-China and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam in 1975, it is unlikely that this collective decision was arrived at without considerable deliberation. Nevertheless, as then Malaysian Prime Minister Hussein Onn explained, ASEAN was fundamentally a “socio-economic organization,” and attempting to change its character into a security alliance would “create misunderstanding in the region and undermine the positive achievements of ASEAN in promoting peace and stability.”³³

Furthermore, the ASEAN states were all militarily weak, which would have made the usefulness of any such pact highly suspect. This is consistent with Handel’s argument that an alignment of weak states not only does not improve their collective security, but it causes their defense costs to rise while reducing the efficiency and reliability of their security.³⁴ The ASEAN states also did not perceive a common external enemy, which is often an impetus for alliance-formation. It is worth noting here that the ASEAN states generally did not consider outright interstate conflicts with each other to be the primary threat to their security at the time of the association’s formation. Instead, internal stability was their primary concern, with racial tensions rife within many of the ASEAN states, in addition to ethnic separatist movements in Thailand, Philippines and Indonesia. And although a high-intensity military conflict was underway in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, for the ASEAN states the Communist problem was manifest as one of

³³Amitav Acharya, “The Association of Southeast Asian Nations: “Security Community” or “Defence Community”?” *Pacific Affairs* 64, no. 2 (1991): 163.

³⁴Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (Great Britain: Frank Cass & Co., 1990), 153-155.

domestic insurgency, against which an interstate alliance would have been of little utility.³⁵

Indeed, for the ASEAN leaders, the effects of the Cold War on Indochina served to reinforce the negative consequences of being too closely aligned with either side of the conflict, not least the very real danger of becoming the battleground for the superpowers' contest of wills.³⁶ Thus, in order to safeguard their sovereignty and shore up internal stability, the ASEAN states effectively pursued a variant of Nils Orvik's "defense against help" strategy, where small states resist interference by a larger state by persuading him that they are strong enough to defend themselves against any of the larger state's potential enemies.³⁷ While this did not preclude the ASEAN states from pursuing bilateral relationships with countries such as the U.S. in order to meet their immediate security needs, commentators such as Narine, Acharya, Michael Leifer³⁸ and Muthiah Alagappa³⁹ all agree that the region as a whole became oriented towards a more self-reliant security posture. This was apparent in the 1971 Declaration that established Southeast Asia as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). The Declaration, undertaken by the ASEAN member states but convened outside the ASEAN framework,

³⁵Acharya, "The Association of Southeast Asian Nations," 161.

³⁶Narine, 196; Acharya, "The Association of Southeast Asian Nations," 162.

³⁷Nils Orvik, "Defence Against Help--A Strategy for Small States?" *Survival* 15, no. 5 (1973): 228.

³⁸Michael Leifer, *ASEAN and the Security of Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1989), 52-60.

³⁹Muthiah Alagappa, "Regional Arrangements and International Security in Southeast Asia: Going Beyond ZOPFAN," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 12, no. 4 (March 1991): 272-275.

pledged that the Southeast Asian countries would abstain from entering into military alliances with external powers in exchange for freedom from “any form or manner of interference by outside Powers.”⁴⁰

Another key reason for the shift towards self-reliance was the perceived capriciousness of foreign help. In 1968, Britain made a unilateral decision to accelerate its withdrawal from Southeast Asia, forcing Malaysia and Singapore to rethink their security strategies. Then in 1969, the so-called Nixon Doctrine called for the U.S.’ Asian allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security. While ostensibly directed towards South Vietnam, the Nixon Doctrine certainly had wider ramifications on the region (Thailand and Philippines in particular), and many in Southeast Asia would interpret this as evidence of a waning U.S. commitment to its regional allies.⁴¹ These developments, juxtaposed with the unfolding malaise in Indochina, provided a powerful cautionary tale for the region as it weighed the range of security options before it. Indeed, applying Reiter’s learning theory towards the collective post-colonial experiences of the ASEAN states, it is little wonder that the idea of a regional alliance never took hold.

Today, ASEAN has matured considerably as an organization, buoyed by the relative warmth and stability of regional relationships in recent decades. Its membership has doubled in size to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, and an ASEAN Charter, providing legal status and an institutional framework for the association, was entered into force in December 2008. The association has also made

⁴⁰Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, “Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration,” *Foreign Affairs Malaysia*, vol. 4.4 (December 1971): 57-59.

⁴¹Narine, 198.

cautious steps forward in advancing security cooperation, most notably with the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994 and the inauguration of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting in 2006. Significantly, these initiatives have afforded ample opportunities for extra-regional engagement, albeit at a measured pace that is comfortable for all ASEAN countries. This reflects ASEAN's gradual shift away from the idea of ZOPFAN in the post-Cold War era--just as growing international economic interdependence necessitates Southeast Asia's integration with the world economy, ASEAN states recognize that their security needs are better served by engagement rather than by insularity.⁴²

These initiatives have also strengthened the mechanisms for defense-related dialogue as well as for practical cooperation amongst ASEAN militaries, complementing the thickening network of bilateral military ties. Still, substantive progress at a regional level has been fairly limited. Chan Chun Sing pointed to a persisting regional bias towards the development of bilateral ties as opposed to equivalent multilateral links as an impediment to the emergence of a common security regime in Southeast Asia.⁴³ According to Narine, this lack of progress can also be attributed to the character of the organization, or what is commonly referred to as the "ASEAN way" of doing business--in essence a strict adherence to consultation and consensus. Where such consensus is absent, the association will typically avoid taking a stand on an issue in the interests of

⁴²Narine, 209-210.

⁴³Chan Chun Sing, *Whither a Common Security for Southeast Asia?* (Master's Thesis, Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, June 1998), 112-113.

unity and solidarity.⁴⁴ Rickli would characterize this as part of the prevailing “strategic culture” within ASEAN, and considering the roots of the association, such a modality is certainly understandable. However, while it has contributed significantly to the reduction of intra-ASEAN tensions over time, it has also hamstrung the regional grouping, since positions are necessarily reduced to the lowest common denominator. If the challenges of such an approach were already self-evident in the early days of ASEAN, when there were only five members, the expansion of the grouping has only exacerbated these, and imposed natural limits on what the organization can hope to achieve in more sensitive areas such as defense.

The result is that no ASEAN country sees an indigenous ASEAN arrangement as a comprehensive solution to its defense needs. As Acharya observes, the pursuit of security linkages with friendly external powers remains a consistent feature of the ASEAN regional security environment.⁴⁵ The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) involving Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom is one enduring example. Singapore’s well-established bilateral defense relationship with the U.S. is another, as are the city-state’s continuing efforts to broaden its base of defense relationships (with the recent notable inclusions of China and India) to hedge against possible shifts in the global balance of power. What is certain is that ASEAN is no closer to assuming the character of a traditional military alliance than it was at its inception. Not only does there continue to be no common perceived threat that could drive the formation of such an alliance, but more importantly, the ASEAN countries have diverged

⁴⁴Narine, 202.

⁴⁵Acharya, “The Association of Southeast Asian Nations,” 172.

considerably in terms of their levels of national development and strategic priorities, making a formal alliance if anything even more unlikely.

In sum, Singapore's regional security environment does not fit easily into the traditional theoretical moulds that would suggest a propensity towards either alliance formation or neutrality. ASEAN remains relevant today because its member states recognize that their international political influence is greatly enhanced by being part of a larger organization. Ironically enough, however, the association finds itself limited by the sum of its parts, as a desire for inclusiveness on the one hand and consensus on the other generates competing tensions that often find compromise in a less ambitious agenda. For this reason, ASEAN is unlikely to dictate the tone of regional defense developments for the foreseeable future. Instead, it is the overlapping and interlocking network of bilateral ties--both intra-regional as well as extra-regional--that will continue to define the security character of Southeast Asia.

Singapore's Security Paradigms

Singapore's security paradigms, which essentially describe how Singapore's leaders viewed the world and the prevailing security situation around them, form the key link between the theories identified in the first section of chapter 2, and how they were or were not applied by Singapore's leaders in the course of the country's development. As the architect of modern-day Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew was instrumental in the formulation of most, if not all, of the country's key national policies in its early years of independence, and he remains highly influential today in his role as Minister Mentor in Singapore's cabinet. For this reason, his memoirs are a natural place to start in order to gain insight into the considerations that underlay Singapore's defense policy in its early

years of independence. Building primarily on his unique perspective, as well as on the views espoused over the years by the country's senior leadership in newspaper reports and in parliament, this thesis has identified two paradigms that appear to have dominated Singapore's strategic thinking about its security since independence.

The first is Singapore's innate vulnerability. Given the country's small size and the fact that it had its independence thrust upon it by its expulsion from the Malaysian Federation, it is perhaps unsurprising that Singapore's first generation of leaders were loathe to take its viability as a nation-state for granted. This sense of vulnerability has evolved considerably since then, as vibrant economic growth, a robust self-defense capability and a stable regional environment would appear to have rendered Singapore's survival considerably less precarious than at birth. But it remains unquestionably as an enduring facet within the country's leadership psyche.

The second dominant paradigm is a desire for self-sufficiency in defense. The roots of this paradigm were discussed briefly in the preceding subsection, in the context of the ASEAN states' collective adjustment to the post-colonial era. It can be argued that opportunities to reduce its defense burden have presented themselves at various points and in various forms over the years; nevertheless, while Singapore's security has been bolstered by its prodigious foreign policy, its leaders have resolutely refused to entrust the fate of the nation into the hands of others.

Unanticipated Independence

Singapore's defense policy evolution is rooted in the circumstances surrounding its independence on 9 August 1965. Prior to that, the Malayan Federation, comprising the states of modern-day Peninsular Malaysia, had gained independence from the British in

1957. Although Singapore was granted internal self-government in 1959, when Lee was elected prime minister, it would remain a British colony until 1963, when Singapore and the British Borneo territories were merged with the Malayan Federation to form the Federation of Malaysia.

Significantly, Singapore's merger with the Federation was something that Singapore's leadership--and Lee in particular--had viewed as a geopolitical imperative. Singapore had a small population, no geographical hinterland, and a shortage of natural resources, including fresh water. Since the nineteenth century, Singapore had also relied heavily on the British for its internal security and defense needs. With the downsizing of the British Empire following WWII, it seemed natural that Singapore's fortunes would have to be closely linked with its northern neighbor's, much like how things were under the British during its colonial heyday. In fact, in late 1961, when Singapore was on the cusp of gaining independence from the British, Lee himself delivered a series of radio talks in which he argued the case for merger with Malaysia. His view was patently shared by many Singapore residents as well, as 71 percent of voters supported merger in a referendum held in September 1962.⁴⁶

This arrangement proved short-lived, however. According to Tim Huxley, an array of problems relating to constitutional issues, racial tensions, and insufferable political differences between Lee's People's Action Party and the government in Kuala Lumpur led both sides to conclude that separation was the only feasible solution to avert

⁴⁶Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), 462.

escalating tensions.⁴⁷ In the end, for all the potential economies of scale that existed between the two entities, the strident arguments for meritocracy and multiracialism emanating from the People's Action Party in majority ethnic-Chinese Singapore were fundamentally at odds with the concept of political birthrights for indigenous Malays that had taken root in the rest of the Federation. Both sides were also unable to agree on a fair distribution of economic resources and on the creation of a common market that had been Singapore's primary impetus for merger.⁴⁸ Thus, within a span of just over two years, Singapore had gone from British colony, to a part of the Malaysian Federation, and finally to an independent nation. It had been a roller-coaster ride towards a sovereign destination, which Singapore's leaders, by their own accounts, approached with a measure of foreboding that was exceeded only by their steely determination to succeed.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the details of Singapore's independence, except to make the point that its unanticipated separation from Malaysia had contributed significantly to the development of an acute sense of vulnerability early on. Besides Lee's memoirs, which revisit many pertinent historical documents in addition to describing the view from the south side of the Causeway, Michael Leifer's and Huxley's writings offer valuable third-party perspectives that make for excellent further reading.

⁴⁷Tim Huxley, *Defending the Lion City: The Armed Forces of Singapore* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 6-7.

⁴⁸Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy—Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000), 27-28, 60.

Defense in the Early Years

Notwithstanding the difficult circumstances surrounding its birth, Singapore did not come into its own as an entirely defenseless nation. Between 1854 and 1956, Singapore had maintained a collection of volunteer reserve units with the encouragement and assistance of the British. This was later augmented by two regular infantry battalions of local recruits (the 1st and 2nd Singapore Infantry Regiments), raised between 1957 and 1963 in anticipation of eventual independence from Britain. Merger in 1963 saw Singapore's military units being absorbed into the Malaysian armed forces, and both the regular battalions would see action during the *Konfrontasi* instigated by Indonesia to destabilize the newly-formed Malaysian Federation.

Up to this point, Britain was still the unquestioned bulwark of external defense for both Singapore and Malaysia. Singapore, in particular, had been the focus of British military infrastructural development in the region, and the colonial power had returned to Singapore even after the embarrassing capitulation of its supposedly "impregnable fortress" to the Japanese in WWII. By the time British forces had played a key role in defeating the Communists during the Malayan Emergency of 1948 to 1960, however, it had become increasingly clear that the colonial presence would come to an end sooner rather than later. Still, this withdrawal was envisaged to be a gradual process while its former colonies found their feet. As a show of commitment to the continued stability of the region, Britain signed an agreement with the newly-independent Malaya in 1957, which permitted Britain to maintain bases and forces on its territory even as it assisted in the development of indigenous armed forces. This agreement was later extended to cover

the Malaysian Federation (including Singapore) following the merger of the two entities in 1963.

With the separation in 1965 this agreement technically no longer applied to Singapore, although there was little expectation that the British would deviate from the status quo in the immediate future. The situation governing the region's indigenous military forces was considerably less straightforward, however, as the negotiations surrounding post-separation defense arrangements between Malaysia and Singapore reflected the deep fractures that had led to separation in the first place. The pertinent terms of the separation agreement seemed clear enough: Singapore and Malaysia would establish a Joint Defence Council; both sides agreed not to enter into treaties with third parties that might be deemed "detrimental to the independence and defence of the territory of the other party"; and Malaysia would assist Singapore with external defense in return for Singapore's contribution of military units for this purpose, as well as its continued permission for Malaysia to maintain its existing bases in Singapore.⁴⁹ By all accounts, the separation agreement seemed committed to a continuation of the status quo, at least in the military realm. However, just as merger had proved unworkable, a defense arrangement that was predicated on both parties having unified political and strategic goals was clearly unrealistic and ultimately doomed to failure.

An Enduring Perception of Vulnerability

The clause that allowed for the maintenance of Malaysian bases in Singapore was soon a cause for tension as it complicated Singapore's efforts to establish a separate

⁴⁹Peter Boyce, *Malaysia and Singapore in International Diplomacy: Documents and Commentaries* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1968), 32.

national identity. In his memoirs, Lee recounted how the commander of the Malaysian unit stationed in Singapore “insisted” on escorting him to the inaugural sitting of Singapore’s Parliament in December 1965, despite Lee’s protestations and the fact that Malaysia’s military presence was supposed to be intended only for external defense. Then, from February 1966 to November 1967, Malaysia refused to recall its battalion stationed in Singapore back to Malaysia, ostensibly to guard against possible inter-communal violence. Not surprisingly, Lee interpreted these actions as attempts by Kuala Lumpur to control and intimidate Singapore’s government and its people, and claimed that these only “stiffened (their) resolve” to build up their own defense forces.⁵⁰

Lee felt he had good reason to question the impartiality of Malaysian forces in the event of any outbreak of ethnic violence. According to Lee, there were ultranationalist elements in Kuala Lumpur who were upset that Singapore had been allowed to leave the Federation, and he feared that they would try to instigate a coup by Malaysian forces in Singapore in order to compel a re-merger on Kuala Lumpur’s terms.⁵¹ Singapore’s dependence on Malaysia for the bulk of its water supplies was another possible source of leverage that Malaysia had over the city-state, and the fact that Malaysian leaders “could station troops in Singapore, squat on us and if necessary close the Causeway and cut off our water supply”⁵² made for some disquieting thoughts.

⁵⁰Lee, *The Singapore Story*, 11-15.

⁵¹Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First--The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2000), 6.

⁵²Lee, *The Singapore Story*, 663.

Britain's accelerating military drawdown in Southeast Asia served to compound this sense of vulnerability. The former colonial power's deteriorating economic situation had caused it to review its defense commitment to the region several times in quick succession. In 1966, for example, Britain announced its initial intentions for a reduced (but continuing) military presence, later revising this to a firm timetable for withdrawal that was to culminate in the mid-1970s. By 1968, however, even this deadline had been abruptly brought forward to 1971 in the face of mounting domestic economic problems in the United Kingdom.

Singapore's response to these developments was to seek a rapid build-up of its own armed forces. With its two existing infantry battalions severely depleted by personnel transfers to the Malaysian army following separation, Singapore's first defense minister, Dr. Goh Keng Swee, decided that the only viable option was to maintain a relatively small regular force that could be supplemented by conscripts and volunteer reservists. Singapore had thus embarked on a path towards a citizen army, which was formalized by a parliamentary bill in 1967 that established universal National Service for 18-year-old male citizens and permanent residents.

A 1984 interview of Lee's son and current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong offers direct insight into the thinking behind Singapore's defense policy during the 1970s through to the late 1980s. The younger Lee, then a Brigadier-General in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), likened Singapore's early defense strategy to that of a "poisonous shrimp," which though unable to avoid ingestion by larger predators on account of its own strength, would nevertheless be able to inflict a great deal of pain in the process. This was deterrence strategy in its basest form, premised on Singapore having a

respectable--and widely recognized--self-defense capability such that potential aggressors would estimate the costs of invading Singapore to far outweigh its benefits. He acknowledged, however, that the “poisonous shrimp” strategy was not ideal from Singapore’s standpoint because it left the country with a Hobson’s choice of “suicide or surrender” in the face of a credible threat by a larger, belligerent nation. Instead, he said that Singapore needed the capacity to inflict intolerable costs on potential enemies while still being able to survive to tell the tale. According to him, this strategy should convey the message that “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.”⁵³

Developing a robust armed forces was thus the Republic’s spirited response to its inherent weaknesses. Speaking in 2003, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Dr. Tony Tan Keng Yam echoed the exhortations of the Roman writer and military strategist Flavius Vegetius Renatus when he declared: “If we want peace, we have to prepare for war. . . This is the basis of our policy of deterrence. . . potential aggressors must know that the cost of any military adventurism against Singapore would be too high for them.”⁵⁴ The fruits of this policy are apparent today in the maturation of the “Third-Generation” SAF, which has successfully incorporated cutting-edge

⁵³“A Conversation with BG Lee Hsien Loong,” *Asean Forecast* 4, no. 10 (October 1984), 164, in Bilveer Singh, “The Military and Small States: The Role of Hard Power in Singapore’s Domestic and Foreign Policy” (Presentation, Sixth Pan-European International Relations Conference, Turin, Italy, 12-15 September, 2007), http://archive.sgir.eu/uploads/SINGH-SINGAPOREMILITARYPOWER_TURINO7.pdf (accessed 14 October 2009), 15-17.

⁵⁴Dr. Tony Tan K. Y., “Statement by Dr. Tony Tan Keng Yam, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, at the Committee of Supply Debate,” 14 March 2003, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2003/mar/14mar03_nr.html.print.html?Status=1 (accessed 14 October 2009).

unmanned technologies and the latest networked fighting concepts en route to becoming what Jane's Defence Weekly acknowledges is "by far the most advanced military force in Southeast Asia" with "a clear capability advantage over other Southeast Asian militaries."⁵⁵ Having what many regard as the region's preeminent armed forces appears to have done little to alleviate the nation's profound sense of vulnerability, however. The numbers certainly tell the story, as its projected FY 2010 defense budget of SGD 11.5 billion⁵⁶ (USD 8.2 billion)--its highest to date in absolute terms--suggests that Singapore is not content to rest on its defense laurels even in the wake of a global economic crisis.

In this regard, dissecting the budget speeches delivered annually in parliament by Singapore's sitting Minister for Defence--to justify the proceeding year's budget--allows us to trace the modern-day evolution of the country's perception of vulnerability. In recent years, where the threat of interstate war has become increasingly further removed from the minds of most Singaporeans, the defense leadership has seen it fit to issue periodic warnings against complacency with regard to the country's security. Indeed, it has become almost *de rigueur* for the Minister for Defence to preface his arguments for funding with explicit references to the immutable characteristics of Singapore's geostrategic situation, such as its lack of strategic depth and its location at the confluence of major sea routes. The example of Kuwait in 1991 is also evoked with regularity--most

⁵⁵Trefor Moss, "Buying an Advantage," *Jane's Defence Weekly Online*, 18 January 2010, http://www4.janes.com/subscribe/jdw/doc_view.jsp?K2DocKey=/content1/janesdata/mags/jdw/history/jdw2010/jdw41992.htm@current&Prod_Name=JDW&QueryText= (accessed 8 February 2010).

⁵⁶Ministry of Finance, Singapore, "Singapore Budget 2010: Revenue and Expenditure Estimates (Ministry of Defence)," [http://www.mof.gov.sg/budget_2010/revenue_expenditure/attachment/10%20MINDEF %20AEE2010.pdf](http://www.mof.gov.sg/budget_2010/revenue_expenditure/attachment/10%20MINDEF%20AEE2010.pdf) (accessed 8 May 2010).

recently in the 2006⁵⁷ and 2009⁵⁸ budget speeches--as a cautionary tale of what could happen to an economically prosperous nation that takes its security for granted.

At the same time, Singapore's leaders are keenly attuned to shifts in the global security landscape, such as the increasing influence of non-state actors, the threats to stability posed by failing states and environmental changes, as well as the seemingly inexorable shift towards multi-polarity in the international system. These developments are seen to overlay the more traditional concerns about interstate conflict, and the country's defense leadership has not only imbibed these, but also woven them seamlessly into the vulnerability narrative. In his February 2009 speech to parliament, for example, Singapore's defense minister Teo Chee Hean catalogued the potential threats to the nation, including terrorism, piracy, pandemics and cross-border migration. He summed up the myriad security challenges facing the country as emanating from "360-degrees," and warned that these had the potential to be compounded further by the global economic crisis.⁵⁹ Thus, while some observers may perceive the threat of invasion to have diminished, it is clear that Singapore's leaders do not regard the aggregate threats to Singapore's security as being significantly less acute than at independence.

To be sure, Singapore is not unique among states in recognizing the risks associated with the above phenomena; in fact, one could reasonably argue that it would

⁵⁷Teo Chee Hean, "Speech by Minister for Defence Teo Chee Hean, at Committee of Supply Debate 2006," 6 March 2006, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2006/mar/06mar06_nr.html (accessed 14 October 2009).

⁵⁸Teo Chee Hean, "Speech by Minister for Defence Teo Chee Hean, at Committee of Supply Debate 2009," 12 February 2009, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2009/feb/12feb09_speech.html (accessed 14 October 2009).

⁵⁹Teo, Speech, Committee of Supply Debate 2009.

be foolhardy of its leaders to turn a blind eye to threats that have already demonstrated their adverse effects on others in the international system. Indeed, as the country's fortunes have improved markedly over the years, the government seems to feel an added urgency to communicate these sobering realities to the so-called "post-65ers"--the generation born after independence in 1965, and the products of a largely secure environment and steady economic growth. As Leifer observed, "Singapore is an exceptional state in terms of its economic performance, (as well as) in the way in which the spectre of worst-case disasters arising from an innate vulnerability hovers perpetually over the island in the perception of its political leaders."⁶⁰

A Preference for Self-Sufficiency in Defense

Singapore's unwavering commitment to paying top dollar for defense not only suggests an enduring sense of vulnerability; it is also indicative of its desire for self-sufficiency and freedom of action. After all, as discussed earlier in this chapter, a small state seeking to enhance its security usually has the choice of several options, of which the path to self-sufficiency is among the more expensive and lesser-trodden ones available. In this respect, Singapore's choices have unquestionably been shaped by historical circumstance, which has given rise to the apparent paradox of a country highly averse to depending on others for its defense, even as it revels in its inter-connectedness with the world in just about every other regard.

The subsection on Singapore's regional security environment already highlighted several reasons for the region's collective shift towards a more self-reliant security

⁶⁰Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy*, 9.

posture, such as its recent emergence from the colonial experience, as well as the perceived capriciousness of foreign help. If anything, these factors were amplified within Singapore's considerations, given that the country was the most directly impacted by the accelerated British military drawdown. The U.S. certainly had the means to fill the security vacuum, although its willingness to do so had been called into question by the Nixon Doctrine, even as the Vietnam War was becoming increasingly unpopular amongst the wider international community. Moreover, while Lee Kuan Yew was keen for the U.S. to remain engaged in the region, he had his doubts about the U.S.' suitability as Singapore's exclusive security guarantor, because he perceived the ways in which they were wont to exercise their considerable influence to be at odds with his vision of an independent Singapore. Whereas the British were seen to have enforced their colonial will with a "certain civility," Lee regarded the U.S. at the time as "a power on the ascendant, with bulging muscles and a habit of flexing them," as evidenced by their dealings with the South Vietnamese, Thai and Filipino leaders.⁶¹

Singapore's desire for self-reliance was further accentuated by its perceived vulnerability as a small, newly-independent state surrounded by larger neighbors with ambiguous intentions. The region was also in a state of post-colonial flux and still very much in the process of coming to terms with the subtleties of foreign policy. In such an environment, explicit threats on the use of force were not entirely uncommon between states. To Singapore's leaders, this environment reinforced the need for a strong self-defense capability, which complemented its pugnacious attitude towards upholding its sovereignty and reducing foreign intervention in its internal affairs.

⁶¹Lee, *From Third World to First*, 4.

For example, in October 1968, after two Indonesian commandoes were hanged in Singapore for the killing of three Singapore citizens in 1964 during the height of the *Konfrontasi*, the Indonesian armed forces announced that they would hold maneuvers in their territorial waters close to Singapore, with the Indonesian marine commander even declaring that he would personally lead a task force to invade Singapore.⁶² In the end, the continued British military presence in Singapore at the time probably helped to ensure that calm heads prevailed in this episode. Lee, writing in his memoirs, recounted Singapore's refusal to accede to Indonesian pleas for clemency for the two commandoes in the months leading up to the execution (although it did release at least 45 other Indonesians detained for offences committed during the *Konfrontasi*). Although surely aware of the inevitable damage it would cause to bilateral relations in the short-term, Lee was unequivocal about the importance of standing firm on this issue, believing that Singapore's neighbors would otherwise "walk over us with impunity" once the British withdrew their forces from Singapore in 1971.⁶³ The obvious corollary to this was the need for Singapore to rapidly develop its own self-defense capability, to prepare for the time when the fledgling nation would be forced to emerge from the protective shelter of deployed British forces.

These considerations continue to figure heavily in Singapore's leadership psyche, as is evident in the budget speeches to parliament over the past decade. In 2003, for example, Dr. Tan cautioned that "if we are weak, those who want to impose their will on us may be tempted to go beyond spouting the rhetoric of war to actually try to use

⁶²Lee, *From Third World to First*, 21-23; Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy*, 75.

⁶³Lee, *From Third World to First*, 22.

military force to subjugate us or prevent us from pursuing our national interests.”⁶⁴ Since taking over as Minister for Defence in 2004, Teo has likewise given voice to a similar refrain. Addressing parliament in 2005, he argued that “providing for our own defence allows us to chart our own course as an independent sovereign nation, without having to buckle under pressure from larger states, or to become subservient to their strategic imperatives,”⁶⁵ while in 2006, he again contended that “it is the lot of small nations to come under external pressure--as we have from time to time . . . the SAF gives us the political space to chart our own destiny.”⁶⁶

Singapore’s relationships with its neighbors have come a long way since independence, and with the continuing maturation of dispute mechanisms within the international community, today the threat of any outbreak of interstate conflict in Southeast Asia appears remote at best. It is clear, however, that Singapore’s leaders do not view these developments as a sufficient guarantee of the country’s security, and have demonstrated a continued willingness to expend considerable resource on an area that few external observers would characterize as a contemporary national weakness.

It is also true that the rationale underlying the country’s investments in defense encompasses more than just the fending off of existential threats. In the nation’s formative years, Singapore’s leaders, and Lee Kuan Yew in particular, were determined that the country would achieve success on its own terms, un-beholden to their larger

⁶⁴Tan, Statement, Committee of Supply Debate 2003.

⁶⁵Teo Chee Hean, “Speech by Minister Teo Chee Hean at the Committee of Supply Debate 2005,” Singapore, 4 March 2005, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2005/mar/04mar05_nr.html (accessed 14 October 2009).

⁶⁶Teo, Speech, Committee of Supply Debate 2006.

neighbors or to any other extra-regional power. This desire lives on in the present generation of leaders led by Lee Hsien Loong, who have not only inherited the task of upholding Singapore's sovereignty, but who have also inherited their predecessors' regard for a credible military as a crucial ingredient in this endeavor. Thus, while they may have evolved in sophistication and scale over the years, Singapore's overarching defense policy principles have arguably remained fundamentally unchanged since independence, as exemplified by the two enduring paradigms that actively reinforce one another.

At the end of the day, regardless of whether Singapore's defense spending inclinations were driven by prudence or paranoia, the fact remains that these paradigms are firmly entrenched within Singapore's leadership psyche. Moreover, there has been a deliberate effort by the leadership to ensure that a sense of vulnerability and an appreciation for the importance of providing for your own defense remain rooted in the consciousness of the average Singaporean. As Paul Kattenburg observed, "hardly anything is more important in international affairs than the historical images and perceptions that men carry in their heads"⁶⁷--by this measure, the impact of the two paradigms on the evolution of Singapore's defense policy certainly cannot be overstated.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 has established the conditions for analysis by providing three layers of contextual focus. The first section on theoretical underpinnings examined the literature on

⁶⁷Paul M. Kattenburg, *The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1945-1975* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1980), 317, in David H. Petraeus, "Lessons of History and Lessons of Vietnam," *Parameters* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 43-53.

why conflict arises between states, the security options that are available to small states, as well as the empirical correlation between defense spending and national development. These were laid out in general terms, to provide a base palette of colors with which to paint a coherent picture of Singapore's defense policy performance. The second section on Singapore's defense policy evolution zoomed in further to provide two additional levels of resolution, firstly with regard to the schemas and interactive norms that have developed within Singapore's regional security environment, and secondly in the evolution of Singapore's own security paradigms. Identifying and understanding these distinct levels should assist in focusing our efforts on the specific portion of the analytical canvas that is applicable to the Singapore experience.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Returning to the motivation for this thesis, chapter 1 had framed the primary research question as follows: “could and should Singapore pursue a less expansive defense policy without compromising its national goals?” Following from this, two secondary questions were posed: (1) to what extent has Singapore’s defense policy been integral in serving its national objectives from independence to the present day; and (2) in view of its contemporary security environment, should Singapore maintain its current defense policy trajectory? Chapter 2 then provided three layers of contextual focus, from the theoretical underpinnings at the broadest level, down to Singapore’s regional security environment and particular defense paradigms. Armed with these tools, chapter 3 lays out the plan of action that gets to the heart of whether Singapore’s defense policy is a paragon of excellence that bears emulating, or if conversely it is an exercise in excessiveness, whose inefficiencies may have been masked by the country’s impressive economic growth record amidst a period of interstate stability.

Identifying National Objectives

The one commonality between all national defense policies is that they ultimately exist as a means to an end. Given that Singapore’s is certainly no exception, it only makes sense that its defense policy be evaluated in light of the country’s national objectives. The preceding chapter identified two security paradigms that have taken hold in the Singaporean leadership’s psyche: an enduring perception of vulnerability, and a preference for self-sufficiency in defense. Extrapolating from these paradigms, this thesis

focused on two national goals that are pertinent to the pursuit of Singapore's defense policy: (1) reducing its vulnerability; and (2) mitigating its lack of physical size by expanding its international influence. These two objectives in turn comprised the broad frame of analysis in assessing the outcomes of Singapore's defense policy in chapter 4.

The rationale behind the identification of the first objective is obvious--besides the fact that every successful national defense policy must, by definition, enhance that nation's security, this is also a straightforward derivation from the Singaporean paradigm of persisting vulnerability. The second national goal relates back to Laurent Goetschel's definition of small states as those with relatively little influence on their international environment, and whose autonomy with respect to this environment is relatively small.⁶⁸ In this regard, Singapore's preference for self-sufficiency in defense sets it apart from most other small states, in that it has refused to accept the distribution of international influence amongst states as an immutable factor. This perspective has been crucial in the development of Singapore's defense policy--rather than settling within the ambit of influence of one or several larger states, Singapore's leaders have sought to actively increase the country's influence on its external environment by building up a robust self-defense capability. Thus, the effectiveness of Singapore's defense policy can be judged on its success in reducing the country's vulnerability to external threats, as well as on the extent to which it has bolstered its influence on the international stage.

⁶⁸Goetschel, 14-15.

Objective 1: Reducing Singapore's Vulnerability

While there appears to be a strong correlation between Singapore's adoption of its defense policy and the country's improving security situation over the years, an objective determination of success ultimately hinges on there being a clear causal relationship between the two in order to adequately answer the first secondary research question.

This thesis thus adopted a two-pronged approach towards the analysis of this objective: first, to assess the rationality of Singapore's defense policy path, it examined the initial predisposition to conflict in the region, drawing on the theoretical factors that influence the choices that states make to enhance their security. More specifically, this section utilized Gray's and Loo's analyses on the impact of geography and Hirshleifer's notion of complementary and competing preferences as a means to gauge the initial predisposition to conflict in the region.

The second step was to evaluate the success of that policy in advancing its national objectives. In this regard, Blainey's work, emphasizing the importance of perceptions, constituted the principal theoretical basis to evaluate the efficacy of Singapore's deterrence strategies in bringing about a reduction in vulnerability, especially in its early years of independence. On the flip side, this section also considered the possibility that Singapore's defense spending levels may have contributed to a regional security dilemma developing, and the extent to which a limited arms race with its neighbors may have had a detrimental effect on its overall security.

Objective 2: Expanding Singapore's International Influence

Having considered the impact of Singapore's defense policy on the country's vulnerability, the next section looked beyond the military instrument of national power to

take a broader view of how Singapore's defense policy has provided the tools for the country to expand its international influence. In particular, this thesis focused on the economic and diplomatic instruments, on account that these are arguably the hallmarks of the success that Singapore has achieved to date. This section was especially relevant in answering the second secondary research question, as it examined the wisdom behind the country's sustained levels of investment in its conventional military capabilities in light of the fact that Singapore's vulnerability to interstate attack appears relatively low for the foreseeable future.

In analyzing Singapore's economic instrument of power, this thesis examined the role of its defense policy in creating the conditions conducive for economic growth. It also drew comparisons between the development of Singapore's defense industry and the economy at large, to discern the tangible economic contributions of Singapore's defense policy. These factors were weighed against the findings of Deger and Smith, Feffer, and Kirshner, to explore the reasons why Singapore's situation appears to defy the oft-observed inverse relationship between defense spending and economic performance in developing and newly-industrializing economies. Following this, the section on the diplomatic instrument of power highlighted several anecdotes to illustrate how Singapore's defense policy has impacted its goal of expanding its influence in its dealings with other international actors, en route to outlining both the passive and active roles of Singapore's military as an instrument of diplomacy.

Having considered each of the identified national objectives in turn, the analysis then concluded with some observations on how Singapore's defense policy has matured vis-à-vis the country's evolution within the international environment.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

To answer the primary research question of “could and should Singapore pursue a less expansive defense policy without compromising its national goals?,” this chapter will adopt a sequential analysis of Singapore’s defense policy vis-à-vis the two identified national objectives of (1) reducing Singapore’s vulnerability; and (2) expanding its international influence.

With regard to the objective of reducing Singapore’s vulnerability, this analysis will first consider the extent to which Singapore was and is truly vulnerable. Thereafter, it will examine the ways in which Singapore’s defense policy could have either mitigated or reinforced that sense of vulnerability as Singapore’s security environment has gradually evolved. With regard to the expansion of Singapore’s international influence, the analysis will consider Singapore’s defense policy within the broader context of national power. Specifically, the emphasis will be on the economic and diplomatic instruments of power, because of their particular relevance for a small state in Singapore’s situation.

Persisting Vulnerability and Singapore’s Defense Policy

Given that Singapore’s sovereignty has not been seriously threatened by armed conflict since independence, and that its prospects for survival as a nation-state would in fact appear to have improved steadily over the past 45 years, it would be hard to argue against the ostensible success of Singapore’s defense policy. Nevertheless, while the correlation between the adoption of its defense policy and its improving security situation

is undeniable, an objective determination of a successful defense policy ultimately hinges on there being a clear causal relationship between the two. There are a couple of facets to this: the first is to demonstrate that Singapore really was vulnerable, to establish a rational basis for its defense policy; the second is to demonstrate that Singapore's defense policy was indeed effective in alleviating the country's vulnerability.

Was Singapore Really Vulnerable?

The paradigm of enduring vulnerability was derived in chapter 2 based on the Singaporean establishment's observed reaction to its circumstances. This paradigm, clearly evident within the psyche of Singapore's past and current generation leaders, now needs to be judged against an objective yardstick in order to control for the effects of possible paranoia. If it is established that the country may not have been as vulnerable as its leaders perceived it to be, for example, then this would limit the amount of credit that can be ascribed to Singapore's defense policy for having reduced the country's vulnerability over the years. This would in turn inform the analysis of whether Singapore's defense policy is excessive going forward.

In an effort to distinguish hyperbole from reality, this chapter will draw on theoretical factors identified in chapter 2 that influence the choices states make to enhance their security. More specifically, this section will examine Gray's and Loo's analyses on the impact of geography, as well as Hirshleifer's notion of complementary and competing preferences, as a means to gauge the initial predisposition to conflict in the region.

Geography and Political Space

Singapore's leaders have regularly cited the country's small size and lack of strategic depth as a critical vulnerability. Implicit within this sense of geographical vulnerability is a keen awareness of regional context, without which a lack of size would, if anything, be more of an inconvenience than a geostrategic liability--an island isolated in the middle of the Pacific, for example, would be less preoccupied with the threat of invasion than would a small, landlocked state surrounded by larger neighbors. As Gray observed, the relative location of states has a significant role in determining each state's perception of its "political space," which according to Loo then shapes each state's calculation of how much the use of force will factor into interstate relations.

In this regard, Singapore's political space within Southeast Asia has often been described by politicians, analysts and academics in terms of its prevailing ethnic-Chinese identity in a predominantly Malay-Muslim locale. Such characterizations, which emphasize the starkness of Singapore's situation at the expense of its regional commonalities, certainly do nothing to ease mistrust or to minimize the specter of conflict. Nevertheless, they are not entirely without basis in suggesting the precarious nature of an independent Singapore, particularly in the late 1960s. Indeed, one could plausibly argue that during the uncertain circumstances surrounding Singapore's birth as an independent state, both Indonesia and Malaysia behaved as though they perceived Singapore to be within their respective political spaces, with the implication that either country may have been tempted to exert their control over the small city-state through the use of coercive force.

For example, although the government in Kuala Lumpur had decided that the two-year-long experiment with merger had proved unworkable, there were clearly elements within Malaysia for whom the separation in 1965 did not herald the start of an equal state-to-state relationship. The fact that Malaysia took almost two years to accede to Singapore's request to recall the Malaysian battalion stationed in Singapore was one indication of this. And although Indonesia did not make any explicit claim to Singapore's territory at the time of its independence, President Sukarno had earlier instigated the *Konfrontasi*, which Leifer described as a form of coercive diplomacy,⁶⁹ to challenge Malaysia's international legitimacy while Singapore was still a part of the Federation. This campaign included acts of terror and intimidation within Singapore, one of which led to the execution of two Indonesian commandoes in 1968 in an episode that was described briefly in chapter 2.

In light of these events, it is no surprise that Singapore's founding generation of leaders opted to pursue a robust defense policy, especially at a time when the regional appetite for collective security arrangements was poor and the external security option had lost some of its luster. This is also consistent with the postulations of Nordhaus, Oneal and Russett, who argued that a state's assessment of the probability of a "fatal, militarized dispute" is the single most important determinant of defense spending, even more so than the military expenditures of surrounding friends or foes.

Today, the notion that either of its most proximate neighbors harbors any insidious designs on Singapore's territorial sovereignty would appear far-fetched, as the overt tensions that may have existed through to the early 1970s have abated significantly

⁶⁹Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy*, 2.

with time and mutual economic development. Constructivists⁷⁰ would also point to evolving international norms that increasingly reject the use of force as a means for settling interstate disputes. Indeed, Joseph Nye argued that such norms are more likely to gain traction in industrialized states, whose tolerance for war decreases as their societies become more inclined towards material welfare rather than glory in the field of battle.⁷¹

Nevertheless, complexities remain in Singapore's relationships with its two larger neighbors that discourage a complacent attitude. For one, Singapore's traditional dependence on its neighbors for natural resources such as fresh water and sand is never far removed from the Singaporean consciousness, as yet another lever through which the island nation could be subject to pressure. However, this should become less of a factor over time as Singapore continues to diversify its sources of essential materials.

Singapore's leaders are also especially sensitive to lingering expectations that the island-nation should defer to its larger neighbors out of "respect" even on strictly domestic issues, in what Lee Kuan Yew characterized as the *abang-adik* (big brother-little brother) relationship in the Malay vernacular.⁷² The indignant public and official reaction in Malaysia to the 1986 state visit of Israeli President Chaim Herzog to Singapore was one such manifestation of this, which Leifer interpreted as evidence that Malaysia was not according the same respect to Singapore's sovereign status as it did to

⁷⁰Constructivism represents a diverse school of theorists who emphasize the importance of ideas and culture, as opposed to just power and institutions, in shaping the discourse of international politics.

⁷¹Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Limits of American Power," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 4 (Winter 2002-2003): 549.

⁷²Lee, *From Third World to First*, 247.

its other regional neighbors even some two decades after the separation.⁷³ Former Indonesian President B.J. Habibie was similarly undiplomatic during an interview he gave to the *Asian Wall Street Journal* shortly after assuming office in 1998. Gesturing to a map, Habibie reportedly remarked derisively, “there are 211 million people [in Indonesia]. Look at the map. All the green [area] is Indonesia. And that red dot is Singapore. Look at that.”⁷⁴ Not surprisingly, this geographical snub was greeted with some consternation in Singapore. It is also unlikely to be forgotten anytime soon, especially since the label has come to be embraced as an ironic symbol of the city-state’s ability to defy the odds. As recently as 2009, Singapore’s Foreign Minister George Yeo reflected, “When President Habibie dismissed us as a little red dot, he was expressing his frustration at our refusal to do his bidding. . . . Yes, indeed, we are a little red dot, one that is right smack in the centre of Southeast Asia, bright red shining through, not to be erased or overcast.”⁷⁵

It bears re-emphasizing that such anecdotes are the exception rather than the norm in what can be fairly characterized today as warm bilateral relations between Singapore and its neighbors. Nevertheless, what the occasional diplomatic *faux pas* has suggested is that to some degree, Singapore’s immediate neighbors remain cognizant of Singapore’s inherent vulnerability as a function of its immutable geographical characteristics.

⁷³Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy*, 50.

⁷⁴Lee, *From Third World to First*, 282-283; Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy*, 144.

⁷⁵Lee Siew Hua, “Envoys tell stories of Little Red Dot,” *The Straits Times*, 14 August 2009, http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/media/yr2009/Red%20Dot%20II%20book%20launch_130809/ST_Envoys%20tell%20stories%20of%20Little%20Red%20Dot%20_140809.pdf (accessed 28 March 2010).

Preferences

Besides their relative locations and geographical endowments, another key factor shaping the nature of the relationship between neighboring countries is the compatibility of their respective state preferences. According to Hirshleifer, a state's preferences describe the outcomes that the state desires. Where these outcomes or interests are directly opposed to the interests of another state, there is a source of friction and the accompanying prospect of conflict.⁷⁶

At the broadest level, it would appear that Singapore's preferences are not fundamentally opposed to its neighbors'. Granted, some historical baggage persists and is likely to endure as a potential source of friction. Singapore's preference for consummate sovereignty in its internal decisions, for example, could be said to run counter to Malaysia's and Indonesia's shared preference for respect from the small city-state in their mutual dealings; this has led occasionally to disagreements and diplomatic flare-ups. A possible explanation for why these have not spiraled out of control, however, is that these conflicting preferences are accorded different levels of priority by either side.

For Singapore, retaining control of its destiny and the freedom to dictate its own foreign policy is a fundamental tenet of its existence as an independent state. As such, its leaders have pursued a robust defense policy as a tenacious back-up against any perceived challenges to its sovereignty. For both Malaysia and Indonesia, on the other hand, the preference for respect from Singapore is arguably not nearly as fundamental a national objective. Indeed, that Singapore was "allowed" to separate clearly indicates that Malaysia's leaders were amenable to a Federation shed of formal Singaporean obeisance.

⁷⁶Hirshleifer, 13-14.

Seen in this light, neither Malaysia nor Indonesia would be likely to push an issue that does not impinge on their core interests, especially if it seemed an issue that Singapore might go to arms for.

On the other hand, it could be argued that Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have in common the intertwining preferences for peace and economic prosperity at the core of their respective national existences. While this certainly does not preclude a measure of economic competition and one-upmanship between Singapore and its neighbors, this is tempered by the shared realization that a “beggar thy neighbor” policy would ultimately undermine the development of their respective economies in the long run. This is unlike the situation in the Middle East, for example, where several Arab states are fundamentally opposed to the existence of the nation-state of Israel. By contrast, the situation in Southeast Asia is significantly less charged due to the existence of complementary core preferences, which favors what Hirshleifer referred to as the Coase-ian approach to interactions over the Machiavellian one. This could help to account for the fact that Singapore’s relationships with its neighbors have been characterized in the main by positive, win-win exchanges, as well as a commitment to cooperation that has largely overshadowed any bilateral differences.

The net analysis suggests that Singapore’s vulnerability to the threat or use of military force, while most acute in the years immediately preceding independence, has been ratcheted down significantly by the region’s shared core preferences for peace and economic prosperity. However, this does not change the fact that Singapore’s long-standing paradigm of vulnerability is rooted in rationality, and will always remain a

factor--no matter how remote--as a consequence of the country's immutable geographical realities.

At the same time, it is difficult to quantify, by mere observation, the extent to which Singapore's reduced vulnerability is the result of its consistently robust defense policy. As Hirshleifer pointed out, a state's choice between the Coase-ian and Machiavellian approaches is shaped not only by preferences, but also by the perceived opportunities available to it. The following subsection will thus examine the possible basis for a causal relationship between Singapore's defense policy and what appears to be the gradual improvement in its security environment.

Deterrence and the Power of Perceptions

It does not make sense for a small country such as Singapore to have aggressive intentions towards any other country. Our defence posture is designed to deter military interference or pressure against Singapore, and to defend ourselves if our survival or vital national interests are at stake. A capable and operationally ready SAF ensures this.⁷⁷

Singapore's defense policy has always been predicated on deterrence, although its defense philosophy has matured over the years as the country's capability to defend itself has improved in step with its economic achievements. No longer content to play the role of the poisonous shrimp that perishes while inflicting punishment on its would-be predators, Singapore has continued to hone its military instrument to ensure the survival of the country in the event that deterrence fails and a military conflict becomes unavoidable. This is reflected in the mission statement of Singapore's Ministry of

⁷⁷Teo Chee Hean, "Speech by Mr Teo Chee Hean, Minister for Defence, at Committee of Supply Debate on Defence Budget," Singapore, 5 March 2007, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/news_and_events/nr/2007/mar/05mar07_nr.html (accessed 14 October 2009).

Defence and the SAF, which is “to enhance Singapore’s peace and security through deterrence and diplomacy, and should these fail, to secure a swift and decisive victory over the aggressor.”⁷⁸ Here, the wording of the mission statement is critical--while the ability to secure a decisive victory is crucial in reducing the country’s susceptibility to the threat of force, the primacy of deterrence and diplomacy is sacrosanct and ultimately circumscribes the role of Singapore’s military forces.

Evaluating a defense policy of deterrence poses some unique challenges, not least of which is the difficulty in drawing nuanced conclusions about its success. By relying exclusively on empirical results, the verdict becomes hopelessly binary, since it could be argued that a deterrence policy is, by definition, successful right up until the moment that it fails to deter an attack. What is required in the case of a country like Singapore, which espouses a policy of deterrence and has not been attacked since gaining independence, is a determination of the extent to which its defense policy can be held responsible for deterring would-be attackers. Such a determination would necessarily rest on some degree of inference and extrapolation, although these uncertainties can be mitigated through the judicious selection of a sound theoretical framework.

In this regard, this thesis will draw on Blainey’s analysis on the sources of conflict, and in particular his emphasis on the role of state leaders’ perceptions in determining the probability of interstate conflict. According to Blainey, a state’s decision on whether to go to war is shaped not only by its perception of the prizes and penalties of using military force, but also by its perception of the power distribution between states.

⁷⁸Ministry of Defence, Singapore, Official website, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/about_us/mission.html (accessed 4 April 2010).

Each state's assessment of relative power in turn rests on seven factors: (1) military strength; (2) predictions of how other states would behave in the event of war; (3) perceptions of internal unity; (4) perceptions of prosperity and of the ability to sustain war; (5) the memory of past sufferings of war; (6) nationalism and ideology; and (7) the personality and mental qualities of the leaders in charge.⁷⁹ Since the concept of deterrence operates very much within the perceptive realm, Blainey's analysis is especially germane to an analysis of Singapore's defense policy.

Restated in Blainey's terms, then, the success of Singapore's defense policy--insofar as its deterrence objectives are concerned--hinges on its ability to shape the relative power equation in the calculations of its potential adversaries, to the extent that the perceived penalty of attempting the use of military force against Singapore is deemed prohibitive. This analysis contends that Singapore's very public commitment to a robust defense policy would have strengthened at least three of the above seven factors directly in Singapore's favor, at least in the mind of a rational actor. First, the perception of Singapore's military strength would have been augmented by the consistent investment in its armed forces. Second, its anticipated behavior in the event of war or the threat of war would be to respond vigorously, backed by a determined leadership and a well-resourced military. And third, Singapore's policy of universal male conscription should improve perceptions of its internal unity.

In addition, a fourth factor could benefit indirectly from its defense policy, as Singapore's perceived ability to sustain war should be bolstered by a pattern of consistent defense spending that has been relatively impervious to economic fluctuations. With the

⁷⁹Blainey, 113-123.

last three factors (the memory of past sufferings of war; nationalism and ideology; and the personality and mental qualities of the leaders in charge) likely to remain neutral to policy factors, Blainey's theory would thus predict a net deterrent effect on Singapore's potential adversaries, as a consequence of Singapore's defense policy's ability to shape the perceptions of rational decision-makers.

When More Can Mean Less

Although a strong military and a robust defense policy have definite deterrent effects, there are also countervailing forces associated with increased military spending that could potentially reduce a country's overall security. For example, in what is commonly referred to as a security dilemma, there could come a point where a state's investment in its military induces a feeling of insecurity amongst its neighbors, and thus initiates an arms race as either side constantly tries to outdo the other.

In this regard, Singapore's leaders have long demonstrated a keen awareness that an "over-development" of military capabilities, relative to the rest of the region, may be counterproductive in a benign regional strategic environment. As Dr. Goh Keng Swee, then deputy prime minister and defense minister, argued in 1978, Singapore would not want to be armed "to the teeth" for fear of starting "an arms race in our part of the world."⁸⁰ In addition, Singapore resolutely refrains from commenting directly on arms purchases or military modernizations undertaken by other countries, preferring instead to maintain a dignified silence in an effort to prevent a competitive dynamic from developing. Singapore's defense ministers also often reiterate the six percent cap of its

⁸⁰Huxley, 67.

defense budget (as a percentage of its GDP), probably to emphasize the upper bounds of its defense spending and to pre-empt possible charges of a reactionary or escalatory defense policy.

Realistically, however, Singapore's ability to obviate the risk of a regional security dilemma developing is constrained by the fact that its military capabilities are already widely perceived to be the most advanced in the region. In this sense, its small size and lack of expansionist ambition probably works to Singapore's advantage in mitigating regional concerns. Even so, it will likely face an uphill battle in reassuring its immediate neighbors--especially its closest neighbor Malaysia--for as long as it pursues its current defense policy trajectory. This is particularly so when the Singaporean definition of a credible deterrence now effectively entails having military superiority over its potential adversaries, in order to avoid going down the road of the perishable poisonous shrimp. As Huxley observed in 2000, although Singapore was never viewed as a serious security threat from a Malaysian standpoint, many of the latter's recent military acquisitions were almost certainly intended at least in part to redress the military imbalance between the two countries.⁸¹

In the final analysis, Singapore might not be able to have its cake and eat it too. Its desire to maintain a strong military stems from its inherent insecurities as a small state and an ethnic abnormality in the region. To the extent that these formidable military capabilities arouse regional suspicions, that is a price that Singapore must accept if it wants to retain that measure of control over its own destiny.

⁸¹Huxley, 65-66.

Finding and maintaining the right balance will be a perennial challenge going forward. From a pure security perspective, this analysis would argue that Singapore probably has it about right for now--to be sure, some of its neighbors have probably armed themselves in part as a response to Singapore's military developments, and Singapore's avowed commitment to its present defense policy path may feed a lingering distrust in its bilateral relationships. Ultimately, however, the most relevant outcome is that the specter of interstate conflict no longer persists in Southeast Asia, and part of the reason for that could be attributed to Singapore's robust military deterrence. Singapore's neighbors have also not yet mustered the political and economic will to challenge the city-state's current military superiority, leaving Singapore in precisely the situation it would have hoped to be in with respect to the regional military balance. For that, having to endure the vestiges of a security dilemma is arguably a price worth paying.

The decision is slightly less clear-cut, however, when the question of present and future tradeoffs comes into play. While one could argue that Singapore's defense policy decisions as a newly-independent country were rational and perhaps even prudent investments to fend off existential threats, it would also be defensible to say that the same policy trajectory has become excessive as the security environment has gradually become more benign. Put differently, the fact that deterrence played a key role in creating this relatively benign environment does not automatically imply that the same degree of deterrence remains necessary to *preserve* the current benign environment. Singapore's interconnectedness within the global economic system, for example, would possibly afford it a measure of protection against an attack by another state. And unlike Kuwait in

1991, Singapore's lack of a controllable natural resource reduces its inherent attractiveness as a potential target for annexation.

Such arguments, allied with the high cost of pursuing its current defense policy, beg the question of whether Singapore would in fact be better off tapering down its defense budgetary commitments. To the extent that the country's vulnerabilities can be traced back to immutable geographical factors, this would suggest that Singapore's leaders cannot afford to take its security for granted, and that the maintenance of a credible deterrence capability is likely to remain an important stabilizing factor in the region. The question, then, becomes one of degree--at which point does "credible" become "excessive," and the opportunity cost of that defense dollar outweigh its marginal utility? To put this issue in the proper perspective, the following section will examine Singapore's defense policy within the broader ambit of national power, in consideration of the second identified national goal--that of increasing Singapore's international influence.

National Power, International Influence and Singapore's Defense Policy

Nye defined power as the ability to affect others in order to achieve one's goals or desired outcomes.⁸² In the realm of international relations, that ability to affect others comes in many forms, which often fall within categories such as (but not limited to) diplomatic, military, economic, information and cultural instruments of national power. As one would expect, Singapore's defense policy impacts the military instrument of

⁸²Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson Longman, 2007), 60.

national power most directly, and the preceding section examined the extent to which the military instrument has been able to achieve the goal of reducing Singapore's vulnerability, primarily through deterrence.

The next step is to look beyond the military instrument of power, to take a broader view of how Singapore's defense policy has shaped the country's ability to achieve its desired objectives. Indeed, for a small state like Singapore--which resides in a relatively peaceful neighborhood, harbors no designs on neighboring territory, and acknowledges pragmatically that it is a price-taker in international relations--one would hardly expect the military to be its dominant instrument of national power. This is even less so when it comes to expanding Singapore's influence in the current international environment.

A holistic assessment of Singapore's current defense policy trajectory should thus analyze the interactive dynamic between the military and other instruments of national power, especially those that a state in Singapore's position would be able to wield with greater discretion. In this regard, this thesis will focus on Singapore's economic and diplomatic instruments, which are arguably most synonymous with the Singapore success story amongst the various sources of national power. In particular, the analysis will examine how Singapore's defense policy has complemented these two instruments in expanding Singapore's international influence, which was identified earlier as a national objective based on Singapore's paradigm of desiring self-sufficiency in defense.

Defense Policy and the Economic Instrument of Power

Singapore's remarkable economic growth spurt has been the primary source of the Republic's plaudits over the years. Its unique brand of development, led by the pro-business, highly visible hand of a government with a strong reputation for integrity, has

led admirers to speak glowingly of the “Singapore model” and to raise it on a pedestal so that other developing countries can better learn from its economic experiences. In fact, beyond the substantial resources accrued by its economic success, it would appear that the success of Singapore’s developmental model in itself constitutes a source of soft power for the city-state, insofar as it inspires others to emulate it. As Leifer observed, “Economic success is the main reason for Singapore’s high status and disproportionate influence in international affairs.”⁸³

One of the key pillars of Singapore’s economic growth, particularly in the immediate post-independence years, has been the amount of foreign capital that Singapore has been able to attract. This has been critical in providing the employment, expertise and access to international markets that the country would not otherwise have been able to develop on its own. In his memoirs, Lee declared that if there was one word to explain Singapore’s early success in attracting foreign investors to the fledgling state, it was confidence⁸⁴--confidence that the government was a dependable partner, confidence in Singapore’s investment environment, and confidence in the very viability of the state. Lee’s observation highlights a crucial area of overlap between Singapore’s military and economic instruments of power, whereby the security and stability afforded by the military instrument has helped to create the conditions conducive to foreign direct investment.

Today, by extension, the military instrument--insofar that it is able to stay relevant in the face of evolving threats and not just interstate ones--remains important to preserve

⁸³Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy*, 10.

⁸⁴Lee, *From Third World to First*, 68.

the conditions for economic growth. Indeed, mindful that the threats to Singapore may appear increasingly diffuse to the average Singaporean with each passing year of prosperity, the current generation of leaders have likened the country's investment in defense to an insurance policy. This emphasizes that now, more than ever, there is something in Singapore worth protecting against the possibility of a catastrophic event, however improbable such an event may seem today.

Evoking the insurance analogy has certainly been useful in maintaining political support for Singapore's defense spending, since it implies prudence, risk-averseness, and perhaps most importantly, the logic of increasing your coverage as the value of what you want to protect increases. This has been the main thrust of the government's argument against anything more drastic than a proportionate reduction in the defense budget during economic downturns. As Minister for Defence Teo Chee Hean pointed out in the midst of the global financial crisis in early 2009, security threats do not disappear during recessions, and in fact have the potential to increase in concert with social and political frictions. Thus, if having a strong armed forces to underpin stability is critical during times of peace, it is arguably even more so when the economy is uncertain.⁸⁵

In addition to undergirding the country's economic success, Singapore's defense policy has also played a tangible role in strengthening the country's economic instrument of power. Just 42 years after its humble beginnings in 1967, for example, the defense industry's flagship conglomerate, ST Engineering (Singapore Technologies Engineering), reported an annual turnover of S\$5.55 billion (US\$3.99 billion) for the provision of both civilian and defense-related products and engineering services across the land, maritime

⁸⁵Teo, Speech, Committee of Supply Debate 2009.

and aerospace domains⁸⁶--a significant contribution towards Singapore's S\$258 billion (US\$185 billion) gross domestic product for 2009.⁸⁷

Defense expenditures have also been a useful tool of fiscal policy. Teo touched on this during his speech to parliament in February 2009, when he revealed his ministry's plans to step up its construction spending in line with the government's broader "resilience package" to mitigate the severity of the 2008 global economic crisis on Singapore's economy.⁸⁸ Although the government is careful to emphasize that defense spending levels are responsive to a long-term strategy rather than to short-term impulses, the scope and overall stability of Singapore's defense policy does afford the government some discretion in managing Singapore's economic growth trajectory, whether through "pump-priming" during economic downturns or by scaling back spending to cool off an overheating economy.

For all its positive effects, however, it is also important to consider how Singapore's investment in its military instrument of power may have detracted from the development of its economic one. As highlighted in chapter 2, the preponderance of empirical evidence suggests an inverse relationship between defense spending and

⁸⁶ST Engineering Press Release, "ST Engineering's Net Profit Grew 27% in 4Q09 Compared to 4Q08," Singapore, 18 February 2010, http://www.stengg.com/pressroom/press_releases_read.aspx?paid=1524 (accessed 8 April 2010). Although it is difficult to separate the accounting for the civilian and defense-related expenditure given the increasing prevalence of dual-use technologies, Ron Matthews and Nellie Zhang Yan had estimated that approximately 49 percent of ST Engineering's efforts in 2007 were focused on defense output.

⁸⁷Singapore Department of Statistics, "GDP at Current Market Prices," Q4/2009, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/economy/ess/aesa11.pdf> (accessed 8 April 2010).

⁸⁸Teo, Speech, Committee of Supply Debate 2009.

economic performance, which Deger and Smith and Feffer attribute to the crowding out of private sector investments by relatively inefficient state-directed spending. The sheer scale of Singapore's defense spending would seem to suggest that its economy should have suffered this to some degree.

That said, it has been difficult to isolate for this effect due to the consistently robust performance of the Singaporean economy since the early 1970s, and the fact that the defense industry was an important, but ultimately not fundamental part of its overall development. As Adrian Kuah pointed out, Singapore's defense industrialization occurred amidst a steady growth dynamic that was centered on textiles in the 1970s, semi-conductors and memory chips in the 1980s, to the present focus on knowledge-intensive industries such as financial services, information technology and biotechnology.⁸⁹ Thus, for as long as the government steered clear of gross imprudence on defense, its defense policy was arguably never in danger of derailing Singapore's economic success story.

In fact, beyond doing no harm to Singapore's economy, Ron Matthews and Nellie Zhang Yan argued that Singapore's investment in its defense industry has had a strongly synergistic effect on the economy, particularly with the growing prevalence of dual-use technologies in an increasingly globalized world. A key consequence of this trend has been the shifting reliance of advanced militaries on global suppliers, with the notable exception of the U.S. where many of these suppliers reside. This has in turn allowed companies like ST Engineering to expand both their civilian and military customer bases,

⁸⁹Adrian W. J. Kuah, "The Political Economy of Defence Industrialisation in Singapore: The Costs, Trade-Offs and Synergies," *Defence Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 2005): 224.

while simultaneously reducing their reliance on either sector. More significantly, this has enabled the local defense industry to complement the Singapore government's broader efforts to build up an indigenous research and development capability, thus facilitating the transfer of technology and skills between the military and civilian sectors.⁹⁰

The overall analysis of Singapore's defense industrialization process thus appears to reinforce Kirshner's argument that military spending could have a positive net effect on the economy through judicious state leadership, which views the defense industrialization impetus through the prism of the country's overall level of development. Initially, Singapore adopted a mercantilist approach towards its early defense industrialization, as attaining self-sufficiency in defense took precedence over strict economic efficiency. Since the 1990s, however, the industry has become increasingly diversified and less reliant on Ministry of Defence contracts, consistent with the government's push for Singaporean companies to compete independently on the international market.⁹¹ Indeed, it is possible to trace Singapore's defense industry's steady climb up the value chain through a focus on innovation and technological expertise, in order to secure its current industrial niche somewhere between the European and American powerhouses and the low-cost engines of the developing world. In this sense, it has mirrored Singapore's overall economic growth path, and although the industry has never occupied a dominant role in the economy, it has been an important source of employment, human capital development and technology creation,

⁹⁰Ron Matthews, and Nellie Zhang Yan, "Small Country 'Total Defence': A Case Study of Singapore," *Defence Studies* 7, no. 3 (September 2007): 388-389.

⁹¹Kuah, 213-227.

encapsulating in many ways the country's philosophy with regard to economic development.

Defense Policy and the Diplomatic Instrument of Power

As a small state lacking in natural resources, Singapore is heavily dependent on a favorable external environment for its development. There are several elements that would constitute such an environment from Singapore's perspective: these include the preservation of its freedom of action, the perpetuation of a system that safeguards the interests of small states like Singapore, and the cultivation of relationships that recognize Singapore's value as a partner. The following section will discuss the role of Singapore's defense policy in reinforcing each of these elements to the city-state's advantage.

The role of the military in preserving Singapore's freedom of action has already been alluded to earlier in this thesis. Firstly, Singapore's freedom of action as an independent state is partly assured by having a robust military deterrence, which encourages other states to pursue a Coase-ian rather than Machiavellian approach towards relations with the island nation. Secondly, in addition to fending off potentially hostile states, a strong military can also maximize freedom of action by reducing Singapore's dependence on other states for security. This was highlighted in chapter 2 when discussing Singapore's preference for self-sufficiency in defense, which in turn would afford it the political space to chart its own destiny with regard to both its foreign and domestic policies.

Singapore's contemporary relationship with the U.S. provides a useful illustration of this latter dynamic. Singapore's leaders clearly recognize the security benefits of keeping the U.S. military meaningfully engaged in Southeast Asia, and have gone to

some lengths to facilitate this. This includes building the berthing infrastructure to accommodate nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, the likes of which Singapore is unlikely to ever acquire. Being so openly aligned with the U.S. also has its risks, such as making Singapore a more attractive target for terrorist attacks by individuals and groups who identify themselves as anti-Western and anti-American.

But Singapore is also no vassal of the U.S., and has demonstrated this by the determined fashion in which it resists any perceived meddling in its internal affairs. The caning of an American youth in 1994 for vandalism, despite high-level U.S. representations (including by then President Clinton) for a non-corporal alternative, stands out as one of the better-known examples of Singapore standing firm in the face of considerable U.S. diplomatic pressure. One could reasonably speculate that the eventual outcome may have been different had Singapore been reliant on the U.S. as its exclusive security guarantor. The point here is not that Singapore can afford to disregard U.S. preferences on account of having a robust military; given the vast power differential between Singapore and the global superpower, that would almost certainly be to Singapore's disadvantage in the long run. Nevertheless, by virtue of providing for its own defense, Singapore has arguably increased its capacity to make dispassionate decisions--whether on naval access rights or on the caning of foreign nationals--based on principles that are in the national interest.

Besides the primarily passive role of the military in preserving Singapore's freedom of action, it is clear that Singapore's leaders also envisaged a broader role for the armed forces as an active instrument of diplomacy. As Teo declared, "[The Ministry of Defence] contributes to the regional security architecture . . . by having a capable SAF

which can engage meaningfully with our ASEAN friends and partner countries, and contribute useful capabilities towards our regional cooperative activities. Without [this], Singapore would play a much more diminished role and we would not have the same voice at the table.”⁹²

This desire for a “voice at the table” is synonymous with Singapore’s national goal of expanding its international influence, and Teo’s description of the role of the military in securing that right to speak reveals a level-headed realization that Singapore needs to find some way to belie its small size if it wants to play with the “big boys.” In this sense, Singapore’s defense policy makes a crucial contribution towards strengthening its diplomatic instrument of national power, to the extent that the Singapore military is exercised as a well-honed tool of foreign policy.

As a small yet thriving state, Singapore has evidently found a niche for itself within the existing international system. This in turn has made it firmly committed to the preservation of the current system, or at least those characteristics of the system that allow a small state like Singapore to flourish. These include the institutions and norms reinforcing the mechanisms of global trade that is and has always been Singapore’s lifeblood. In this regard, Singapore’s leaders have identified terrorism and insecure sea lines of communication as two contemporary threats to Singapore’s livelihood. To mitigate these threats, which are global in nature and beyond the scope of any one country to decisively influence, the Singapore military has been contributing regularly to multinational stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2001 and 2003 respectively. At the same time, Singapore’s navy conducts joint patrols with its

⁹²Teo, Speech, Committee of Supply Debate 2009, 12 February 2009.

Malaysian, Indonesian and Thai counterparts to secure the Straits of Singapore and Malacca for international shipping, in addition to coordinating information sharing arrangements with extra-regional user states. Singapore's maritime security efforts also extend beyond its immediate neighborhood, most notably towards the anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden where a Singaporean naval officer recently assumed rotational command of the multinational Combined Task Force 151 in March 2010. These military deployments far beyond its borders signal Singapore's commitment to preserve the broad workings of the current international system, as well as its willingness to shoulder increased responsibilities as a member of the international community in a fashion that is commensurate with the country's resources and capabilities.

Besides contributing militarily to causes that support a broader international interest, Singapore also uses its military as a tool with which to engage key partners. Indeed, because of the prevailing regional dynamic where it is surrounded by larger states, Singapore has always felt compelled to look beyond its immediate neighborhood, to cultivate relationships with extra-regional powers in an effort to make Singapore's continued independent existence a matter of their interest and concern. Fortunately for Singapore, the strategic importance of the region, and in particular of the Malacca Strait that runs through it, has ensured that the powers have always maintained some level of engagement with the region, albeit with an eye towards safeguarding their own economic and security interests.

Singapore has capitalized on this by utilizing the products of its defense policy to construct a dense web of bilateral defense relationships with regional and extra-regional powers, complementing existing economic and political linkages with these countries.

Singapore's relationships with the U.S., China and India, for instance, while predicated on non-military (chiefly economic) characteristics, have been broadened and deepened by growing defense cooperation. For example, Singapore continues to leverage heavily on U.S. technology and training space--recently inaugurating an F-15SG detachment in Mountain Home, Idaho in 2009--while allowing the use of its air and naval bases to facilitate a U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia. Singapore's bilateral defense cooperation with India has also expanded rapidly in the past decade, with policy and technology exchanges as well as bilateral air, land and naval exercises now regular fixtures within the defense relationship. And in 2008, Singapore and China signed the Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation, which has since paved the way to annual policy talks and the inaugural bilateral training exercise between the two militaries in June 2009. Singapore's ability to maintain these defense relationships is, to a significant degree, proportionate to its military capability. Just as having a weak military would preclude Singapore from contributing meaningfully to multilateral engagements, it would also reduce the incentive for larger powers to engage the small city-state in the realm of defense cooperation.

Nevertheless, while it stands to reason that Singapore must possess some minimum level of military competency in order to be of value as a defense partner, it would also be naïve to think that powerful states maintain defense ties with Singapore primarily for the professional value of such a relationship. Assuming that the premise for these states' engagement with Southeast Asia is to safeguard their economic and security interests in a part of the world with strategic significance, it follows that the big powers' interest in engaging a state like Singapore would stem from its relevance to their broader

regional interests. Part of this relevance accrues from Singapore's geographical position as a littoral state in the Malacca Strait, and its ability--as a consequence of its robust defense policy--to influence the security situation there.

Another aspect of this derives from the element of competition that often exists between powerful states, which are typically loathe to see a competitor or near-competitor gain an advantage in any area of strategic importance. This dynamic is arguably already being played out in various locations around the world, particularly between the U.S. and China and between China and India as far as Asia is concerned. Singapore's ability to cultivate any of these powers, then, especially in an area as sensitive as defense cooperation and in a region as significant as the Malacca Strait, is likely to increase Singapore's attractiveness to the other powers as well. In this way, Singapore's defense policy can be said to reinforce the diplomatic instrument of national power by providing an expanded range of foreign policy options with which the country's leaders can seek to increase Singapore's international influence.

Conclusion

Singapore's decision early on to pursue a robust defense policy appears to have paid immediate dividends by helping to insulate the country from its inherent vulnerabilities en route to its current economic success. This also paved the way for Singapore to exercise an independent foreign policy, un-beholden to regional or extra-regional powers for its security needs.

The role of Singapore's defense policy has since evolved alongside changes in the security environment. As the threat of interstate conflict has receded, the significance of Singapore's defense policy has become increasingly associated with its contributions to

Singapore's non-military instruments of power, and in particular its economic and diplomatic instruments. Framed in terms of Singapore's national goals, this analysis contends that the primary motivation underlying Singapore's defense policy has shifted away from a provision of security and towards an increase in the country's international influence. This trend is represented visually in figure 1.

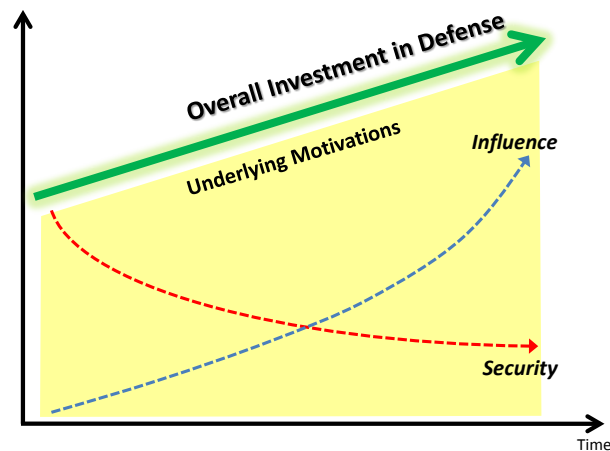


Figure 1. Evolution of Singapore's Defense Policy Trajectory
Source: Created by author.

This trend could be said to mirror the evolution of “vulnerability” within the Singapore context, from the existential threats that plague a weak, newly-independent nation, to the fear of irrelevance for a country that faces continuing pressures to create new opportunities for an increasingly affluent population. Given the capacity of a robust defense policy to reduce Singapore's vulnerability in every sense of the word, it is perhaps little wonder that the city-state's emphasis on defense has not tailed off, but instead has shifted gears to meet the country's latest requirements.

It is necessary to clarify one point about the above diagram--while the arrow representing Singapore's overall investment in defense tracks a steady upward trajectory that is broadly reflective of the situation in reality, it is not a deterministic formality that a shift in emphasis towards expanding international influence should necessitate an overall increase in defense spending. This analysis offers two possible reasons for why this may be so in Singapore's case. First, Singapore's desire to stay relevant as a military partner depends on its demonstrated ability to stay connected with the foremost military concepts and technology. In practical terms, this translates into an impetus to keep up with the proverbial Joneses, in order to be able to speak with credibility when afforded the cherished voice at the table.

Secondly, Singapore's immutable geographical vulnerabilities mean that maintaining a credible deterrence will always remain the *raison d'être* of Singapore's defense policy, even if the contemporary manifestation of that policy pertains more directly to expanding Singapore's international influence. And since successful deterrence occurs within the perceptive realm, the discernable philosophy of Singapore's defense policy could be as important, if not more so, than what it actually spends those defense dollars on. Thus, the fact that Singapore had embarked on a robust military defense early on may to some degree compel it to maintain that same trajectory in order to preserve its deterrent effect. On the flip side, any scaling back on defense spending--while possibly prudent--may be construed as a sign of weakness or waning commitment by Singapore's potential adversaries.

Building on the concepts and paradigms laid out in chapter 2, this analysis has attempted to reconcile Singapore's prodigious defense policy with its modern status as a

thriving state in an ostensibly secure environment. The following chapter will conclude with a summary of these findings as they pertain to the primary research question.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Singapore has defied considerable odds to arrive at where it is today. It has overcome an ambiguous threat environment and outperformed its natural endowments, and these accomplishments have led some international observers to wonder how Singapore apparently achieved so much with so little upheaval. To be sure, the country has had to accept several tradeoffs en route to its present status. Singapore is often praised for being superbly organized, for example, while enduring criticism for its lack of certain social freedoms. Likewise, the freedom of action that Singapore enjoys from being able to provide for its own defense has come at tremendous economic expense, not just in terms of the dollars spent but also the opportunity cost of withdrawing its young men from productive economic activity for a span of over two years.

One of the aims of this thesis was to determine if this focus on defense has been a prudent investment. To this end, it discussed the historical factors and peculiar characteristics of Singapore's regional security environment that led to the decision to pursue a robust defense policy. The analysis then established a plausible link between that policy's effect on external perceptions and the security that Singapore has enjoyed, and how this has in turn contributed to the country's economic wherewithal and ability to withstand diplomatic pressure. The aggregate of these would appear to validate Singapore's defense policy decisions, at least up to this point.

While the above findings may be of particular relevance to countries considering the applicability of the Singapore model to their own situations, of greater consequence to Singapore are the implications of what lies ahead. This means looking beyond whether

Singapore's defense policy was rational, and even how effective it has been to date--what arguably matters most is where Singapore ought to go from here. This analysis will thus conclude by examining whether Singapore's current defense policy is sustainable or desirable in the long run.

Is the Current Trajectory Sustainable?

This question needs to be asked because of the sheer cost of maintaining Singapore's current defense spending trajectory. In light of the uncertain economic climate that has plagued global markets in recent times, an obvious source of concern would be a severe and prolonged recession, of a scale that would potentially derail the country's economic growth by several years.

Without downplaying the risk of such a crisis occurring, however, this analysis contends that such a crisis is *not*, in fact, the primary precipitating risk to Singapore's defense policy trajectory. Due to the highly-connected nature of Singapore's economy, it would likely require a truly global crisis to debilitate Singapore's economy to the extent that it is forced to reassess its fiscal priorities. Given that such a catastrophe is likely to have a comparable impact on other countries as well, any reduction in Singapore's defense spending under those circumstances should, in theory, be broadly commensurate with the actions of other states. In other words, while one cannot rule out the possibility of a crisis occurring that would cause a sustained reduction in Singapore's defense spending, that would not in itself indicate a departure from the current policy trajectory if, in fact, the country's GDP also shrinks by a corresponding amount. Furthermore, as described in the preceding chapters, Singapore has weathered economic crises in the past, during which its leaders have often highlighted the increased risks of regional instability

to argue against any reactionary cuts to defense spending. This, coupled with the establishment's long-term view of defense planning as well as the often reiterated six percent cap on defense spending as a proportion of GDP, should insulate Singapore's current policy trajectory against reactionary impulses.

Neither are favorable external developments likely to bring forth the circumstances that would justify a reduction in defense spending. The "peace dividend" anticipated at the end of the Cold War, for example, ultimately did not materialize as the threat of interstate war was just replaced by new security challenges posed by failing states and non-state actors. In the post-9/11 milieu, the likelihood that states will adopt a complacent attitude towards security threats is arguably even more remote.

Instead, the greatest risk to the sustainability of Singapore's defense policy is likely to come from within, perhaps in the form of popular discontent leading to a reevaluation of Singapore's priorities. This would be consistent with Goldsmith's observation that for non-autocratic states, resource allocation decisions are primarily a political process⁹³. It is true, for instance, that a self-imposed cap on defense spending as a percentage of GDP has been a useful planning assumption for Singapore's defense establishment, while constituting an important public assurance of fiscal discipline. However, there is no guarantee that the public's acquiescence to the present figure of six percent--which is significantly higher than the global average--will remain unwavering. After all, such spending is relatively painless while the economy is experiencing double-digit growth, but is likely to become considerably less palatable as annualized GDP growth continues to slow inevitably with the maturation of the economy.

⁹³Goldsmith, 565.

Still, we are unlikely to see a drastic departure from Singapore's current defense policy trajectory in the short to medium-term. A key reason for this is the continued stability of the incumbent leadership, which remains staunchly committed to a robust defense. Just as crucially, Singapore's leaders would appear to have skillfully removed any debate on Singapore's defense policy from the realm of economic cost-benefit analysis. Instead, the current policy is couched as necessary to maintain the unquantifiable concept of "deterrence", and to provide the stable environment necessary for foreign investment and productive economic activity. Such arguments are obviously extremely difficult to disprove, leaving the odds heavily stacked--at least for now--in favor of the status quo. Whether this trajectory can be sustained in the longer term will depend on at least three factors: (1) the public continuing to buy in to the vulnerability narrative; (2) sustained public confidence in the military as an efficient and effective use of public resource towards reducing that vulnerability; and (3) the continued credibility of the political establishment insofar as making decisions that are consistent with the broader public interest.

Is the Current Trajectory Desirable?

More fundamental than the question of sustainability is the question of whether the current defense policy trajectory is likely to be in Singapore's best interests, or if it might be better off pursuing a different path. In this regard, it is important to heed Benoit's caution to compare existing defense programs with "objective probable substitutes" rather than their "optimum substitutes."⁹⁴ Take for example the argument

⁹⁴Benoit, 276.

that on hindsight, Singapore might have been able to pursue a less expansive (and expensive) defense policy, and still be in no worse off a situation than it is in right now. While certainly plausible, such hypothesizing is an ultimately fruitless exercise-- Singapore's defense policy is what it is today, and there should be no other point of departure when considering any alternative policy trajectory.

Perhaps a more useful way of framing this question, then, is to ask whether a deviation from the current trajectory is more or less likely to advance Singapore's national goals. The preceding analysis had suggested that a scaled-back defense policy would be less likely to accomplish Singapore's goal of reduced vulnerability, as potential adversaries may interpret such a deviation as a possible sign of weakness. For the sake of argument, let us assume that Singapore pursues just a measured scaling back of its defense policy, and that its leaders are able to do so while adroitly managing external perceptions in such a way that there is no discernable effect on the overall deterrence. In such a scenario, chapter 4's finding that the manifestation of Singapore's defense policy has shifted gradually away from a provision of security and towards an expansion in international influence becomes especially germane. Specifically, the long-term cost savings from a less expansive defense policy would have to be weighed against the likely impact this would have on Singapore's non-military instruments of power.

As far as Singapore's economic instrument of power is concerned, it is unlikely that a less expansive defense policy would have a devastating impact. Most importantly perhaps, based on the assumption that the deterrent effect remains largely intact, even a scaled-back defense policy would likely retain the capacity to underwrite the country's economic growth. Depending on how the scaling back is actually effected, there would

probably be some impact on Singapore's economy from reduced defense spending, which at this point is already fairly well integrated within the country's economy. However, the overall impact of this is unlikely to be severe since the defense industry is not one of the key drivers of the Singapore economy, and in the long run one would expect the cost savings to be productively re-allocated to other sectors.

Just as with the insurance function of defense, the freedom of action afforded to Singapore by a robust defense policy is unlikely to be affected by a moderate scaling back of defense spending, as long as the deterrent effect is preserved. On balance, however, the impact of a scaled-back defense policy on Singapore's diplomatic instrument of power is likely to be more pronounced than for its economic instrument. In particular, to the extent that a less expansive defense policy would hinder the ability of the SAF to contribute to multinational efforts, or reduce its perceived utility as a military partner, there is a risk that Singapore may inadvertently blunt an important instrument of its foreign policy. As discussed in the analysis, Singapore's military contributions in places ranging from East Timor to Afghanistan, and from the Strait of Malacca to the Gulf of Aden confer a degree of international influence that Singapore would not otherwise have as a small state. Furthermore, while defense may not be the dominant facet of many of Singapore's bilateral relationships, it certainly introduces breadth and diversity to its relationships. This added dimension ultimately makes these relationships more resilient to the occasional hiccup that may arise in any particular area. For a state that is heavily dependent on a favorable external environment for its security and prosperity, these are critical contributions by a robust defense policy.

Finally, it is important not to overlook the unique role that the military has come to play in Singapore society. It goes beyond the assurance of Singapore's survival as a nation; indeed, 45 years since its unplanned independence, Singapore's defense policy is now so finely interwoven into the tapestry that is the Singapore story that the two are arguably virtually inseparable. In terms of the nation's psyche, being able to identify with a robust military is something that resonates with the country's quest for excellence and international relevance. More crucially, as a common experience for all Singaporean males regardless of privilege or ethnicity, national service has evolved into a vital nation-building tool. That experience not only socializes the Singaporean man-in-the-street on the need for a credible defense; it also gives him a stake in it. No other institution serves a comparable function for this young country of immigrants, and for the Singapore establishment, this must rank as one of the most compelling reasons for maintaining a robust defense policy centered on conscription.

Conclusion

One of the challenges highlighted early on in this thesis was trying to critique a defense policy that has not yet had the opportunity to be proven inadequate. The approach taken was to first trace the logical lines of Singapore's defense policy, as well as the real contributions it has made towards improving the country's security--even though the SAF has yet to fire a shot in anger. Following this, the analysis then established that Singapore's defense policy is not merely an expensive scarecrow. In particular, as the threat of interstate conflict has receded, the significance of Singapore's defense policy has become increasingly associated with its contributions to Singapore's

economic and diplomatic instruments of national power, which in turn facilitate an expansion of the country's international influence.

These factors collectively help explain the apparent contradiction of Singapore's per capita spending on defense being amongst the highest in the world, despite a positive diplomatic climate in the region and the lack of an expeditionary mindset amongst Singapore's leaders. Moreover, there is no immediate impetus for Singapore to deviate from its current defense policy trajectory, which appears sustainable in the short to medium-term, while remaining closely aligned with Singapore's goals of reducing its vulnerability and expanding its influence.

For other states looking to emulate elements of Singapore's success, the Singaporean example does offer useful insights for how a robust defense policy can complement the efforts of a small state trying to establish itself within the existing international system. In this regard, a key takeaway would be the importance of integrating the country's defense policy with the accomplishment of broader national objectives, both to sustain domestic support for defense spending as well as to prevent the military from becoming an end in itself as it grows in size and domestic influence.

At the same time, it is clear that the Singapore model does not offer the only route to secure sovereignty for a small state; in fact, although it has worked out well enough for Singapore, this analysis would be circumspect about recommending this path as one to aspire to. The expense involved is the most obvious caveat. Singapore has enjoyed an enviable record of stellar economic growth which has combined symbiotically with its defense policy, with the former providing the means while the latter creates the conducive conditions. And while the military is always likely to be retained for its

deterrent function, the Singapore establishment has also successfully co-opted the military as an instrument of foreign policy. Indeed, it is this “dual-use” characteristic that arguably provides the strongest political justification for Singapore’s defense spending being maintained several notches above subsistence level. These factors have been central to the pursuit of Singapore’s defense policy trajectory, and as they have arisen out of specific conditions that are fairly unique to Singapore’s situation, may reduce the applicability of the Singapore model for other states.

So is Singapore’s defense policy essential or excessive? Ultimately, the subjectivity of those labels precludes a definitive answer, especially for a country that has not fought a war since its independence and is determined to preserve that status quo-- even at considerable cost. Given the relatively advanced state of the country’s defenses at this point, it stands to reason that Singapore has to spend a lot more to maintain and incrementally improve its defense capabilities as compared to when it first gained independence. At the same time, as its reputation has grown on account of its past defense policy achievements, so has the level of public and international scrutiny of its armed forces, while the tolerance for mistakes has decreased. In other words, not only is Singapore reaping diminishing marginal returns for each defense dollar spent, the marginal cost of maintaining a credible deterrence has also increased significantly.

Under such circumstances, economic theory would typically advise a re-allocation of resources away from defense. Singapore has rejected this option, however, first because its deterrence goals may be compromised by any deviation from its existing defense policy trajectory; second, because of the way the military complements its other instruments of national power; and third, because of the way defense has been integrated

in the fabric of its national identity. In this sense, Singapore might be characterized as a willing victim of its own success, happy to pay what some would judge excessively for a product that it has assessed to be absolutely essential.

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