



**Israel National Defense College**  
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**Strategy – From Theory to Practice:  
Strategic Thought and Strategic Thinking  
Final Assignment**

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This paper analyses Singapore's strategic interactions with its closest neighbours – Malaysia and Indonesia, using the concepts learned from the course “Strategy – From Theory to Practice: Strategic Thoughts and Strategic Thinking”.

### **Affinities Between Actors**

Singapore joined the Federation of Malaya in 1963, but separated from it after only 2 years and became an independent and sovereign state in August 1965. The separation stems from contesting visions between the political leaders of Singapore and Malaysia, where a Muslim-majority Federation of Malaya favoured pro-Muslim policies whereas Singapore insisted on equality regardless of race, as well as irreconcilable socioeconomic differences and racial tensions between both countries. In 1963, Indonesia opposed the formation of the Federation of Malaya (which included Malaysia, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei) and launched Konfrontasi (Confrontation), a low-intensity campaign, against Singapore and Malaysia in response to its formation. Two Indonesian Marines carried out a bombing on a building in Singapore in 1965, which resulted in death and injuries to civilians. The two Indonesia Marines were subsequently apprehended, put on trial and given the death sentence. Despite pleas for clemency by Indonesia political leaders, Singapore stood firm and executed the Marines. The impact of this event was lingering diplomatic tensions between Singapore and Indonesia until 1973.

While Singapore's bilateral ties with Malaysia and Indonesia have improved significantly over the years, these historical legacies and conflicts exist as under-currents in today's geopolitics between Singapore and both countries, and from time to time are used by some political leaders in their politics agenda which triggered renewed tensions in current bilateral ties.

### **Strategic Culture**

Compared to the neighbouring countries, Singapore has a small population, no hinterland, no strategic depth, a shortage of natural resources and relies on other countries for import of its food and water supply. Internally, Singapore also has to guard against the potential for strife within its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. The Singapore government believed that it was critical to strengthen the

nation internally by building up a stable and cohesive society and encouraging economic growth such that over time, the economic growth will translate into potential strength and defensive power. As a small state, Singapore must also be able to defend itself and a credible deterrence was thus vital. This would come from having a strong armed forces as it will provide a nation the capacity to deter. Hence, Singapore adopted an approach of constant investment of significant proportion of its annual budget to build up its defence. Being a small state, Singapore needs to balance its human resource to grow its economy as well as its armed forces. As a large armed forces is not tenable, Singapore adopted a conscript army approach such that it can rapidly mobilize a disproportionately larger defence force to defend Singapore against the aggressor's force when needed. Singapore also placed emphasis on diplomacy, making sure that its survival and well-being are in the interest of other states, so that it will not have to confront its threats and dangers alone.

### **Realistic Approach to Strategic Thinking**

As a small state compared to its neighbouring countries, Singapore is likely to have little chance of survival in a system where “might is right” or the laws of the jungle prevail. Hence, Singapore promotes a global world order governed by the rule of law and international norms in its foreign policy. This can be seen in the case of the Pedra Branca dispute, a territorial dispute between Singapore and Malaysia over several islets at the eastern entrance to the Singapore Straits, where the dispute was brought to the International Court of Justice in 2008 for deliberations. The Singapore government also believed that peace and stability in Southeast Asia is absolutely essential, and remains a strong advocate of ASEAN unity and centrality, for which it was a founding member of ASEAN. At the second ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting in Singapore in 2007, it pushed for the adoption of the first three-year programme (2008-2010) which serves to guide regional cooperation in security issues. While Singapore promotes and expands its foreign relations politically and economically, its approach has been to base these relationships on mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and the equality of national states, regardless of size. It is mindful not to compromise its national interests in order to have good relations and when necessary, to state its

position and stand firm on its ground in a firm and principled manner. The hanging of the two Indonesian marines during Konfrontasi is one such example.

### **Deterrence by Denial**

Total Defence is the cornerstone of Singapore's deterrence strategy which can be associated more closely to deterrence by denial. This concept expanded Singapore's deterrence beyond the military and into the psychological, civil, social, economic and digital domains. The concept was designed to unite all sectors of society in defence of Singapore, and to strengthen the social fabric and enhance the national resilience of the country. Psychological Defence aims at strengthening the collective will and commitment among Singapore's citizens to defend the country; Civil Defence protects and maintains Singapore's civil resources and infrastructure during a national crisis; Social Defence aims at preventing any exploitation of ethnic unrest by stressing the mutual coexistence, cohesion, and harmony based on multicultural consensus and community building regardless of race, language, and religion; Economic Defence aims to develop an open and multi-faceted economy that is resilient even during times of crisis, and to be able to maintain an effective 21<sup>st</sup> century military capability; Digital Defence aims to strengthen Singapore's cybersecurity and help it stand ready to respond to digital threats.

### **Military Innovation by Anticipation**

Singapore's military modernisation is a culmination of evolutionary peacetime innovation processes, with "top-down" oversight. Since its inception in 1968, the military has been continuously innovating by adopting new operational and doctrinal concepts, force structures, and advanced technologies. In the initial years, the focus was on rapid build-up of individual services within its armed forces. In the 1980s and 1990s, the emphasis then shifted from quantitative platform-centric to qualitative system-level capabilities and combined-arms warfare. In the 2000s, the military created new structures and processes to explore new concepts that would strengthen inter-service and inter-agency integration. It further innovated and subsequently created the 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation SAF, a full-spectrum force capable of tackling both traditional and non-traditional security threats. In Singapore, there is a unified civil-military relation

and this facilitated concerted actions between the political and military leaders. With convergence in preferences over key strategic and operational defence policies between the political and military leaders, it led to ‘top-down’ oversight and directions in the military innovations.

### **The Architect’s Parable – The Idea of the Middle**

Malaysia also started a National Service Training Programme (NSTP) in 2004. The aim of the 3 month NSTP was to serve as a way to foster patriotism, and to promote social bonding among the Malaysian youths of different ethnicity as one of the ways to reduce racial polarization. The programme however received criticism for its high budget, with occasional reports of food poisoning and assault. Eventually, the programme was abolished by the Malaysian government in Aug 2018, after it was found that the programme has been misused for misguided indoctrination of certain beliefs. While the NSTP reflected Malaysia government’s aspirations to create more patriotic and civic-minded youth, the implementation of the programme could not match up to the expectations.

### **Strategic Offset**

In 2016, six militants were arrested in Indonesia for planning a rocket attack on the southern city fringe of Singapore from one of the Indonesian islands to the south of Singapore. Concomitantly, the short distance between the land masses of Singapore and Malaysia can also be easily exploited by terrorists to carry out attacks from Malaysia’s southern shores towards the northern part of Singapore. Technological advancement in unmanned aerial vehicles can offer opportunities for terrorists to carry out terror attacks in an unprecedented way. Low cost drones are readily available and can be fitted with explosives to create huge asymmetric impact. A new threat scenario is thus presented to Singapore as terrorists wanting to target Singapore’s interests find it easier now than having to infiltrate into mainland Singapore. Therefore, the police and military force must take into accounts these transnational terrorist threats from non-state elements operating outside of Singapore, and its forces must then be equipped with the necessary weapons and equipment as part of its capability development plans.

## **Intelligence Cycle**

Collaboration in intelligence is key to counter terrorism that is transnational. Close co-operations in the intelligence cycle between security agencies of partner countries can enable timely operational actions to be taken against the perpetrators. The sharing of information and intelligence exchange on terrorists and terrorist organization between Singapore and the neighbouring countries has yielded results thus far. One example was the capture of a perpetrator, Mas Selamat Kastari, following his escape from Singapore. Mas Selamat was the leader of Singapore's Jema'ah Islamiyah cell and he hatched various terror plots to attack Singapore. He was subsequently arrested by the Malaysian police and then extradited to Singapore following a close exchange of intelligence between the law enforcement agencies of both countries. The discovery of the rocket attack plot from Indonesia and the ensuing arrest of the militants was also an example of close co-ordination between Singapore and Indonesia on intelligence sharing in terrorist activities.

## **National Security Policy Planning**

As Singapore's national security has extended beyond the containment of conventional threats to also account for transnational terrorist threats from non-state elements, a whole-of-government approach for national security planning and coordination was adopted to enhance coordination among the different ministries and national security agencies in Singapore. The National Security Coordination Secretariat (NCSC) under the Prime Minister's Office was thus set up for this role. Through this set-up, the government can systematically anticipate and identify emergent security risks, and build up capabilities and resources to deal with these security risks by making the various agencies and stakeholders to work together. The NCSC also coordinates efforts to strengthen Singapore's national resilience, both in the areas of critical national infrastructures and social resilience.

## **Net Assessment**

Singapore's Centre for Strategic Futures performed close to similar functions as the US's Office of Net Assessment. The centre conducts 'horizon scanning' to look out for indications of potential changes that could unsettle the nation such

as discontinuities and strategic surprises. The think tanks in this entity develop net assessment and insights and communicate them to decisions makers for informed policy planning. As an example, the Centre previously identified that disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics and additive manufacturing are upending economic structures, while increasing global connectivity is changing the face and texture of social connections. The net assessments from these works were used to support the policies pertaining to Singapore's ongoing initiatives and efforts to develop into a smart nation.

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