

# Indo-Pacific Strategies for Singapore and Taiwan

## Dealing with Major Powers

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### Abstract

This article considers the similarities and differences faced by Singapore and Taiwan vis-à-vis the major powers in the Indo-Pacific. First, it focuses on the countries' respective differing responses to various "Indo-Pacific" strategic formulations. Next, it moves to consideration of Singapore's and Taiwan's political, geopolitical, and geocultural trajectories. This particular section also addresses the two nations' relations with other small island states across the Indo-Pacific. The subsequent sections provide a bilateral study of Singapore–Taiwan relations, followed by consideration of how Singapore and Taiwan have responded to the greater powers in the region, specifically China, India, Japan, and the United States. Faced with growing Chinese power in the region, questions of agency and strategic autonomy are drawn together in the conclusion, which finds that Singapore is operating from a position of advantage and Taiwan from a position of disadvantage in the Indo-Pacific.

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In the Indo-Pacific Singapore and Taiwan are both having to shape their ongoing survival and flourishing amid surrounding stronger powers like the People's Republic of China (PRC), India, Japan, and the United States. While Taiwan has been happy to use the term *Indo-Pacific* when describing and locating its regional role, Singapore has preferred to keep using the term *Asia-Pacific* when describing and locating its regional role, despite its own physical location at the intersect between the Indian Ocean and Pacific zones.

Regarding Indo-Pacific formulations, Singapore has avoided taking a stance on the advocacy of a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) promoted by Japan since late 2016 and the United States since late-2017. Singapore has instead swung behind the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, adopted in June 2019. The rationale for Singapore's support was explained as due to the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific being underpinned by the principle of ASEAN centrality, economic prosperity particularly through connectivity, and "upholding a rules-based order anchored on international law"

that was “vital for Singapore’s own survival and prosperity as a small city-state.”<sup>1</sup> Singapore has also been ready to participate with other wider Indo-Pacific frameworks that have emphasized economic cooperation and ASEAN centrality, such as China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the European Union (EU) Ministerial Forum on Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific set up in 2022, and indeed the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) also set up in 2022, judging it a welcome US economic reengagement with the region.

In contrast, Taipei has welcomed the US and Japanese FOIP formulation and very much become a partner in its development.<sup>2</sup> Also in contrast to Singapore, Taiwan has rejected China’s MSR initiative as Beijing “attempting to expand its influence through debt-trap diplomacy and influence neighboring countries with its sharp power, which has aroused great concern and suspicion in the international community.”<sup>3</sup> Like Singapore, Taiwan has welcomed EU moves into the Indo-Pacific, in part due to fact that the EU *Indo-Pacific Strategy Paper*, released in September 2021, recorded that tensions in the Taiwan’s Strait had a direct impact on European security and prosperity and singled out Taiwan as a partner for semiconductors and in building resilient and diversified value chains and data protection. Taipei aspires to be a “full member” of the US IPEF, which it sees as a welcome counter to China’s MSR initiative.<sup>4</sup>

### **Politics, Geopolitics, and Geoculture**

Singapore and Taiwan both face problems of survival. Having gained independence in 1965, leaving the newly-formed Malaysia, Singapore’s problem remains its viability as a small ethnic “Chinese” island city state, a “little red dot” with no natural hinterland, adrift amid a large immediately surrounding “Malay” sea represented by Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>5</sup> Domestically, continuity in Singapore has been provided by continuing ascendancy of the People’s Action Party (PAP), first led by Lee Kuan Yew after 1965 and then his son Lee Hsien Loong as prime minister from 2004 onward.

Taiwan’s problem is much more immediate and existential: how to avoid invasion by the PRC, which claims that Taiwan is but a province of the mainland, the much larger Chinese “motherland” (*zuguo*).<sup>6</sup> This has been a long-running issue since 1949, when the Kuomintang-led government of the then Republic of China (ROC) fled to Taiwan; but magnified by the growth of Taiwanese identity and the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) gaining the presidency under Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008) and Tsai Ing-wen (2016–present). Meanwhile, Taiwan is faced with PRC president Xi Jinping’s more assertive China and the rising threat of forcible incorporation of Taiwan, all the more in the wake of the crushing of Hong Kong’s autonomy in 2021.

Singapore is an active player on the regional and international scene. Within Southeast Asia, Singapore plays an important role in the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while its Five Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA) with the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia provide some extra-regional security. Singapore's Pacific focus is around the rim, with full membership in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) mechanism, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), as well as the East Asia Summit (EAS). There has been some neglect of the Pacific island states, which are of little economic or diplomatic significance for Singapore, though Singapore did become a Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Dialogue Partner in January 2022. In the Indian Ocean, Singapore enjoys common membership in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) with Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Maldives, Seychelles, and Madagascar but has not developed any substantive relations with these island partners. Instead, Singapore has focused on expanding links with India. Freedom of navigation concerns have led to Singapore's deployment into the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy duties during the past decade, including successful command in 2018 of the multilateral Combined Task Force (CTF) 151 with navies from Australia, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the US.

In contrast, a DPP-led Taiwan faces mounting diplomatic curtailment of its "international space" (*guoji kongjian*) by Beijing.<sup>7</sup> This diplomatic war between Beijing and Taipei has been acutely played out among the Pacific island states. In September 2019, the Solomon Islands' and Kiribati's defections left only four Pacific island nations (the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu, out of a total of 15 Pacific island states) that recognize Taiwan as the ROC. Taiwan remains restricted within the APEC under the title Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan and is absent from virtually all the various regional and functional bodies for the Indo-Pacific, though APEC remains an important avenue for Taipei to make Taiwan's message heard in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>8</sup> However, DPP administrations have compensated for losing some of Taiwan's diplomatic recognition in the Pacific by developing membership and a prominent position within the Austro-nesian Forum, which brings Taiwan into partnership with Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and various island states like Guam (US), Hawaii (US), Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), Taiwan has enjoyed "development partner" status since 1993, though the PRC pressure has blocked fuller "dialogue partner" status. While Taiwan has sought to cultivate the Pacific island states where it can, Taipei has somewhat neglected the island states in the Indian Ocean and, like Singapore, it has concentrated on developing closer links with India. In an "unofficial" but quite strategic case of mutual recognition by

non-recognized states, mutual recognition between Taiwan and Somaliland, the breakaway province in northern Somalia, in September 2020 brings the prospect of Taiwanese use the Port of Berbera in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding its geopolitics, Singapore's traditional significance has become ever more important.<sup>11</sup> Singapore is a small island city-state sitting at the bottom of the Malayan peninsula, the junction point between the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca, and in a wider sense between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Malacca Strait is a key trade route, the choke point between the Indian Ocean and East Asia/the Pacific. Energy supplies flowing through the Malacca Strait are of particular significance for Japan, India, and China.

Taiwan is also of great geopolitical significance. One commentator summed up Taiwan's significance as the "geographical pivot of History' in the Pacific Age."<sup>12</sup> The island sits in the middle of what the United States considered its "forward defense perimeter" in the 1950s and what China now considers the so-called "First Island Chain" (*diyī daolian*), which runs from Japan through the Ryukyus, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Taiwan guards immediate access to the Western Pacific via the Yonaguni Strait between Taiwan and Japan, and the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines. On the east coast, Taiwan's deepwater naval bases at Su'ao and Hualien enable submarines to directly slip undetected into one of the deepest maritime trenches in the Pacific. Thus, Taiwan is a door that can open and shut westward from the Pacific and eastward from the Chinese mainland. China's drive for Taiwan is then partly a matter of political nationalism, but it is also a matter of geopolitical imperatives.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, in terms of demographics, Singapore's population of 5.45 million, as of June 2021, include ethnic Chinese (75.9 percent), Malays (15 percent), and Indians (7.5 percent). Taiwan has a larger population, around 23.35 million as of January 2022 but a similar, indeed larger, ethnic Chinese base. More than 95 percent of Taiwan's population is considered as Han Chinese, and 2.3 percent (around 534,000) consist of Austronesian indigenous peoples. However, this ethnic Chinese community is extremely variegated, reflecting the Hakka (from Guangdong, speaking Hokkien), who emerged in the late Ming period; the Hoklo (from Fujian, speaking Southern Min), who appeared in the Qing era; and mainlanders who fled to Taiwan in 1945–1950 (speaking Mandarin). Language politics and pressure from the mainland have led to a shift in usage from Mandarin to Hakka and Hoklo.<sup>14</sup> Intermarriage with the Austronesian indigenous groups further blurs the boundaries.

Consequently, national identities in both these island states have moved away from simple Chinese categories.<sup>15</sup> In Singapore, the presence of the Malay and Indian communities makes a common Chinese state identity politically inap-



propriate. Instead, there is a sense of Singapore as a unique multiracial island, bound together by its city-state geography. According to a 2017 survey by the Institute of Policy Studies, 49 percent of Singaporeans identify with both the Singaporean identity and their individual ethnic identity equally, while 35 percent would identify as “Singaporean” first, and 14.2 percent would identify with their own ethnic identity. In Taiwan, recent decades have shown a growing self-identification of feeling Taiwanese rather than Chinese. Comparing the National Chengchi University annual poll for 1992 and June 2022, perceptions of being Chinese had declined from 46.4 percent to 2.4 percent, and being Taiwanese *and* Chinese had also declined from 46.4 percent to 30.4 percent, while identification as Taiwanese has soared from 17.6 percent to 63.7 percent. Both Singapore and Taiwan have moved toward establishing English as a common national second language—for Singapore as a bridge between the Malay, Indian, and Chinese communities and for Taiwan as a means of internationalizing Taiwan away from a Chinese focus, i.e., mainland–PRC–Mandarin.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, to find that Singapore has moved away from a narrow Southeast Asian regionalism toward a deliberate wider global technological “innovation hub” role—a positioning that of course makes the island of interest as a collaborative partner for the greater powers.<sup>16</sup> In Taiwan, there has been a shift in focus from the Chinese mainland to maritime horizons. It is telling that Taiwan’s *National Oceans Policy Guidelines*, issued in 2004, asserted that Taiwan is an “Ocean State (*haiyang guojia*).<sup>17</sup> These are Indo-Pacific maritime horizons. Under President Tsai the linkage is being made explicit, focusing on self-identification involving stress on Taiwan’s “island identity” (*daoyu shenfen*) as a multi-ethnic “Indo-Pacific nation.”<sup>18</sup>

### Singapore–Taiwan Relations

Singapore–Taiwanese relations include long-established defense and economic ties.<sup>19</sup> The Project Starlight arrangements, under which Singapore, lacking space, could militarily train on Taiwan, are well-established, running since 1975. These military links were reaffirmed and expanded under the National Defense Exchange and Security Agreement signed in October 2019, which, despite a hiatus due to COVID-19, was implemented in December 2021.<sup>20</sup> De facto economic recognition of Taiwan was established with the Singapore–Taiwan Economic Partnership (ASTEP) signed in 2013, which took effect in 2014, in which Taiwan’s title was given as the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu. This took Taiwan out of the “shadow” of the PRC.<sup>21</sup> With regard to Taiwan’s game-changer application in October 2021 to join the CPTPP, Sin-

gapore welcomed the application but warned of the “political complications” posed by strong PRC pressure against such Taiwanese entry.<sup>22</sup>

Singapore-Taiwan links continue to attract PRC criticism. The visit by the then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to Taiwan in July 2004, a month before he became Singaporean prime minister, was bitterly denounced by Beijing.<sup>23</sup> The Singaporean response was that this was a private and unofficial visit and that Singapore enjoyed friendly relations with both Beijing and Taipei, though Lee did make mention of the stronger Taiwanese identity among the host population.<sup>24</sup> The PRC also continues to target Singapore-Taiwan military ties.<sup>25</sup> Taiwanese military supplies being sent to Singapore were interdicted in 2016 and held at Hong Kong as a sign of Chinese displeasure, while the following year China snubbed Singapore at its Belt and Road Forum in April 2017 by not inviting the Singapore leader, though this did not stop Singapore from carrying on Project Starlight exercising in Taiwan in the autumn.<sup>26</sup>

Singapore, while happy to see a Taiwan not under mainland PRC control, continues to advise against any moves by the DPP toward independence, on the grounds of regional instability. Lee Kuan Yew warned the first DPP president in 2000 that he must “convince the mainland that he is not de-Sinicizing Taiwan and trying to erase its cultural and historic links with China”, for “if there is no hope of eventual reunification, and Taiwan keeps on indigenizing and drifting away, there will be a moment of truth” by Beijing militarily intervening.<sup>27</sup> Two decades later, Singapore’s advice to Taiwan remains cautious, as demonstrated in Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong stating that “the more international space Taiwan gains, which Beijing sees as the result of tacit encouragement from the US, the more the Mainland [the PRC] will ratchet up pressure on Taiwan.”<sup>28</sup>

While Singapore has sought to dissuade Taiwan from any formal declaration of independence, it took a sharper attitude toward the PRC in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Not only did Singapore strongly criticize Russia and apply sanctions immediately (as did Taiwan), despite the PRC giving succor to Russia, Singapore also moved to warn the PRC against the use of military force in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>29</sup> During August, in the wake of the visit to Taiwan by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, which China bitterly denounced but on which Singapore avoided any comment; it was China’s subsequent military exercises around Taiwan which triggered Singapore warning of Beijing having started a dangerous escalatory spiral with the US.

### **Singapore’s Relations with the Greater Powers**

Singapore has carefully calibrated various economic and security ties with the regional greater powers of India, Japan, the United States, and China.

Singaporean ties with India have steadily deepened since their “strategic partnership” announced in 1992. Taiwanese commentators have argued that Taiwan should learn from Singapore’s successful outreach to India.<sup>30</sup> India has a twofold security value for Singapore:<sup>31</sup> in part as a counter ballast to any overbearing immediacy from Indonesia, but even more so, as Lee Kuan Yew famously noted, “India would be a useful balance to China’s heft” in Southeast Asia.<sup>32</sup> He also noted that it was “a comforting development . . . that a multi-party India is able to take off and keep pace with single-party China,” in part as a model but also as a counterbalance.<sup>33</sup>

An annual Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) has been running since 1994, now alternating between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. Singapore has also participated in the Indian-led Milan multilateral, naval exercises since its inauguration in 1995. The 2003 Defense Cooperation Agreement allows the Singapore army and air force to train on Indian soil. On the economic front, Singapore signed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) in 2005. A “strategic relationship” was signed in November 2015. More practically, in November 2017 the two countries signed a revised and enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, giving the Indian Navy logistical support and refueling access to Singapore’s Changi Naval Base.<sup>34</sup> The annual tri-lateral Singapore, India, Thailand Maritime Exercise (SITMEX) was initiated by in 2019. The fifth India–Singapore Defense Minister’s Dialogue in January 2021 witnessed the signing of the Implementing Agreement on Submarine Rescue Support and Cooperation between the two navies. At the inaugural meeting of the Indian Ocean Region Defense Ministers’ Conclave in February 2021, in a tacit criticism of China, Singapore’s Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen, noted that “Singapore, like India, firmly believes in upholding freedom of navigation and over-flight in the maritime domain, unyielding principles that are vital for maintaining regional peace and stability. . . . to foster a rules-based maritime order in the Indo Pacific.”<sup>35</sup>

Singapore’s relations with Japan have been cordial enough, economic cooperation being the mantra established in the Economic Agreement for a New Age Partnership signed in 2002. They also work together on regional cooperation and technical outreach via the Japan–Singapore Partnership Program (JSPP), established in 1992. However, security cooperation has been relatively circumspect, reflecting Singapore’s sensitivities over the Japanese occupation of Singapore during World War II. Nevertheless, limited bilateral naval exercising has developed in recent years, together with mutual biannual participation since in the American-led Pacific Rim (RIMPAC) exercises since 2014 and in India’s Milan exercises since 2022.<sup>36</sup> A summit meeting in June 2022 witnessed Singapore and Japan signing an enhanced memorandum on defense exchanges.<sup>37</sup>

Singapore's security cooperation with the United States has been substantial. As Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan stated in 2018, "Singapore has never shied from publicly articulating the value of a continued and sustained American presence in our region;" for "we have viewed America as a benign hegemon, a positive force for good and we have been a beneficiary of this presence."<sup>38</sup> Tacit China concerns drive this relationship.

US–Singapore defense cooperation is quite mutual. On the one hand, Singapore has enjoyed Major Security Cooperation Partner status with the United States since 2005, facilitating high-end military supplies and interoperability. Singapore's air force trains in Arizona and Idaho, and a fighter training agreement in Guam was signed in December 2019. The largest number of foreign troops in the continental US are from Singapore. In the other direction, the US logistical command unit Logistics Group Western Pacific is based at Singapore, where the longstanding US presence at Changi Naval Base eases American deployments from the Western Pacific into the Indian Ocean, through aircraft carrier berths, and since 2013 the ongoing rotational presence of rotational US littoral combat ships.<sup>39</sup> This defense arrangement established in 1990 was renewed again in September 2019 and is slated to run until 2035. Singapore also permits the US fly P-8 antisubmarine warfare aircraft from Paya Lebar Air Base since 2015. Annual exercising between the two armies has existed since 1980 (Tiger Balm), between the two air forces since 1990 (Exercise Commando Sling), between the two navies since the late 1990s, and with the US Marine Corp since 2019 (Valiant Mark). Further naval exercises (Pacific Griffin) were added in 2017, most frequently off Guam, but in 2020 held in the South China Sea. Economic and technological cooperation supplement this security cooperation. Washington and Singapore signed the Partnership for Growth and Innovation (PGI) in October 2022, which seeks to improve supply-chain resilience and trustworthy, responsible artificial intelligence, and Singapore joined up to the US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework when set up in 2022. Additionally, the establishment of a US–Singapore Space Dialogue was announced for November 2022.<sup>40</sup>

Last, but not least, Singapore's relations with China remain an "ambivalent" and "awkward" one.<sup>41</sup> Lee Kuan Yew enjoyed a high prestige relationship with Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s and 1980s, with economic modernization a common focus and fruitful avenue for cooperation.<sup>42</sup> Singapore was the first Asian country to have a comprehensive bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China, coming into effect in 2009, the China–Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Initiative (CCI) was signed in 2015, and talk of an international Land-Sea Trade Corridor (ILSTC) running from Singapore to western China has drawn Singapore into "forward engagement" with China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>43</sup>

However, close cultural and economic ties with China sit uneasily with Singapore's security ties with Taiwan, and Singapore's extensive military cooperation with the United States. Although Singapore signed an Enhanced Agreement on Defense Exchanges and Security Cooperation with China in October 2019, practical military cooperation has not developed to anything approximating that which the island has with the United States, or indeed with India. Despite Chinese criticism of such developments; Singapore gave a cautious welcome to the revival of the Australia-India-Japan-United States Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) in 2017, and to the formation of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) trilateral defense agreement in November 2021, as well as joining the US-led IPEF initiative in 2022.<sup>44</sup> Singapore has also distanced itself from China's Huawei G5 initiative.<sup>45</sup>

### Taiwan's Relations with the Greater Powers

Taipei's external relations are shaped by the PRC; an existential threat given Beijing's continuing call is for Taiwan's return to the "motherland" (*zuguo*).<sup>46</sup> The PRC (and notionally Taiwan's Kuomintang party) consider Taiwan and the Taiwanese to be part of the "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu*), awaiting reunification into one Chinese state, for Beijing this being the PRC. However, faced with a DPP administrations leaning toward Taiwanese independence, the PRC has steadily sought to restrict Taiwan's "international space" (*guoji kongjian*) and to apply increasing economic and military pressure on the island.

On the economic front, the DPP has pulled away from the 2010 Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) signed by the KMT administration of Ma Ying-jeou with the mainland—an agreement that Beijing welcomed and the DPP feared as steadily absorbing Taiwan back into the mainland. In contrast, the New Southbound Policy (NSP) immediately announced by the incoming DPP administration of Tsai Ing-wen sought to decrease this potential dependence on the mainland. This new policy is specifically aimed at increasing Taiwan's trade and investment in Southeast Asia, Australasia (especially Australia), and South Asia (especially India).<sup>47</sup> This economic reorientation has been reasonably successful.<sup>48</sup> However, even as Taiwan has sought increased bilateral trade through the NSP, China has successfully blocked Taiwan's participation in the recently concluded Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).<sup>49</sup> It remains to be seen if Beijing can block Taiwan's current application to join the CPTPP.<sup>50</sup> On the military front, Taiwan is faced with ever greater military buildup and increasingly regular Chinese military operations and incursions around Taiwan, with a full scale blockade carried out in the immediate aftermath of the Pelosi visit in August.

India has particular importance for Taiwan given New Delhi's economic, political, and military weight.<sup>51</sup> The NSP complements India's Act East outreach.<sup>52</sup> A new Bilateral Investment Pact was signed in December 2018, and a fuller FTA negotiation between India and Taiwan bodies was commenced in December 2021. India has though been reluctant to give any political recognition to Taiwan or to develop military links. However, in the wake of China–India military confrontation along the Himalayas, it is no surprise to find Taiwanese and indeed Indian commentators arguing that Taiwan and India have a common enemy in China, and for China to warn against such a development.<sup>53</sup>

Taiwan has sought closer links with Japan, and above all the United States. To minimize existing territorial disputes with Tokyo, a Maritime Dialogue was established in 2019. Japan's 2021 *Defense White Paper* referred to Taiwan for the first time as being integral to the peace and security of East Asia. To Taiwan has sought greater support from the United States. Under President Donald Trump, military supplies to Taiwan were increased and some limited military-to-military links were reestablished. US Defense Acts have now mandated greater official contacts. The US–Taiwan Consultations on Democratic Governance in the Indo-Pacific, when established in September 2019, included the participation of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Taiwan has sought closer economic links with the United States under President Joe Biden. An Economic Prosperity Partnership Dialogue (EPPD) led by the Department of State was established in 2020; the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) led by the US Trade Representative was reestablished in June 2021, and a new Technology Trade and Investment Collaboration (TTIC) led by the Department of Commerce was established in December 2021. Taiwan particularly welcomed Taiwan's designation as one of the United States' "leading regional partners" in the *Indo-Pacific Strategy* released by the Biden administration in February 2022—placing Taiwan on par with India and Singapore.<sup>54</sup>

Taiwan has encouraged the United States and Japan to block any Chinese push across the Taiwan Strait. US and Japanese leaders for the first time jointly stressed the importance of "preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" in their summit meeting in June 2021.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Taiwanese leaders must have been pleased the following month to hear Japan's Deputy Prime Minister, Aso Taro, describing any notional attack on Taiwan as an "existential threat" that would require Japan and the United States to "defend Taiwan together."<sup>56</sup> Taiwan has also sought to shape Taiwan–Japan–United States trilateralism, in which the Taiwan–Japan–US Strategic Dialogue (TJUSSD) serves as a useful input on Japanese and US sentiments. While Taiwan sends its ministers and gives presidential welcomes,

Japan and the United States have sent ex-political and ex-military figures, freed from the constraints of political office. TJUSSD has been an important channel for enhancing US–Japan coordination to handle any possible Taiwan conflict.<sup>57</sup> The 2021 TJUSSD was particularly pleasing for Taiwan, given the welcoming address by Scott Busby, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary at the State Department, on closer cyber security cooperation with Taiwan. A further trilateral framework is the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF), launched by Taiwan and the United States in 2015, which Japan joined and has co-hosted since 2019. Taiwanese hopes for greater security assistance from the Quad have been hampered though by probable Indian reluctance at present.<sup>58</sup>

### **Conclusions: Relative Agency, Relative Success**

In terms of threat situation, both Singapore and Taiwan have faced the same problem, the “strategic desperation” of small islands faced with much larger neighbors who either have been (Malaysia and Indonesia in the case of Singapore) or continue to be hostile (China in the case of Taiwan).<sup>59</sup> While Taiwan is bigger than Singapore in population (23.6 million vs. 5.7 million) and size (35,808 km<sup>2</sup> vs. 710 km<sup>2</sup>), it is also faced with a relatively much bigger neighbor China (1.4 billion population and 9,596,960 km<sup>2</sup> size) than is Singapore faced with either Malaysia (32.37 million population and 329,847 km<sup>2</sup> size, or even Indonesia (273.5 million and 1,905 km<sup>2</sup> size). The waters separating Singapore from Malaysia (the Johore Strait) is already crossed by a causeway one km in length, and the waters separating Singapore from the Indonesian city of Batam is 22.5 km, but the Taiwan Straits separating Taiwan’s main island Taipei from the Mainland China is 1340 km wide at its narrowest point. Both Singapore and Taiwan, have followed similar strategies of building up their armed forces, a so-called “porcupine strategy” to deter such potential or actual threatening neighbors. Thus, Taiwan has the advantage of much greater natural water surround, but the disadvantage of a much more hostile type of more powerful neighbor. Singapore’s porcupine strategy has been successful, whereas the success of Taiwan’s porcupine strategy remains uncertain in the face of rising hostility from an increasingly militarily powerful China.

Locally, regarding its immediate neighbors Malaysia and Indonesia, Singapore has maintained full strategic autonomy through various means, including membership of ASEAN and other wider Indo-Pacific regional frameworks like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, an active globalist approach which leverages its economic and technological edge, and its strong security relationship with the US. With China and the US, Singapore’s strategic autonomy has also been successful given its combination of economic cooperation with China but security cooperation with the United States. Neither Beijing nor

Washington can leverage Singapore, precisely because of the presence of the other. Given that neither major power is directly threatening Singapore, the small island city-state can reach out to both states and maximize its strategic autonomy. This was the context for Singapore Foreign Affairs Minister to judge that “for Singapore and our foreign policy, the existential imperative that Mr Lee Kuan Yew has always emphasized to us is relevance”—i.e. relevance for helping US security projection, and relevance for helping China’s economic modernization—but in which “we will be useful, but we will not be made used of.”<sup>60</sup> Singapore’s relationship with India provides a further strengthening of Singaporean strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the US and China.

Taiwan, however, does not have such luxuries. Unlike Singapore, Taiwan faces an immediate existential threat from a nearby Great Power—China. Taipei operates from a position of relative disadvantage regionally, when compared to Singapore’s position of maneuverability. The PRC’s increasing pressure on Taiwan, Taiwan’s deteriorating military balance vis-à-vis the PRC, and the diminishing of Taiwan’s international space combine to render Taiwan’s strategic autonomy as highly circumscribed. After all, Taiwan depends on US military assistance in the event of any Chinese invasion, a nightmare situation that Taiwan faces. This has led Taipei to look for external allies in a way that Singapore need not emulate. However, the highly charged issue of Taiwanese independence makes external help circumscribed—as is the case with Singapore and indeed also India. Nevertheless, Taiwan has managed to circumvent the erosion of diplomatic support in the Pacific Basin through cultivating its role in the Austronesian Forum, has enjoyed some greater traction with Japan, and has achieved solid reinforcement of political and military support from the United States. Taiwan has also attracted greater European political support. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that had tacit Chinese support, Taiwan is though naturally deeply concerned at present about a similar Chinese attack on the island. This concern is fueled by Xi Jinping’s much more assertive projection of Chinese military power in the region, which was most visibly on show in the Taiwan Strait in the aftermath of the Pelosi visit. 🌐

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**Notes**

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