

Strategic Defense Cooperation: The Evolving United States-Singapore Partnership from 2004 to 2024

Truong Thi Hue

School of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences, Duy Tan University

Corresponding Author:

Truong Thi Hue

School of Languages, Humanities and Social Sciences, Duy Tan University,

No 03 – Quang Trung Street – Da Nang, Vietnam

E-mail: truongthihuedtuvn@gmail.com

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Abstract

Between 2004 and 2024, under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, security and defense cooperation between Singapore and the United States of America (US) deepened significantly. The 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement boosted enhanced security, defense, and military collaboration, establishing Singapore as a pivotal American defense partner in Southeast Asia. This partnership comprised joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, defense capacity-building, and responses to non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and cyberwarfare. Additionally, Singapore supported the 2012 Obama Administration Pivot to East Asia strategy by providing critical infrastructure for regional operations. Amid rising geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, the Singapore-US defense relationship remains vital for regional security and stability. This qualitative research traces the evolution of strategic defense cooperation over the past two decades, highlighting how Singapore has maintained a strong alliance despite increasing US-China competition. This enduring partnership is supported by strategic hedging, institutional trust, and pragmatic diplomacy. Data is gathered by document analysis and case studies to examine key strategies and mechanisms helping Singapore achieve close defense cooperation with America while balancing its rapport with China.

Keywords: strategic defense cooperation, Singapore, United States, Indo-Pacific, hedging

1. Introduction

From 2004 to 2024, the security and defense cooperation between Singapore and the United States (US) has deepened significantly, but its theoretical implications and strategic constraints have remained underexamined. The literature describes this relationship in functional terms, but scant attention is paid to underlying tensions, such as Singapore's simultaneous accommodation of US presence and Chinese expansion. This study problematizes the notion that such cooperation is simple or conclusive to see how Singapore handles these dual challenges. The central research questions: how has Singapore prolonged robust defense cooperation with America despite the burgeoning US-China rivalry? What strategies are used to balance between alignment and autonomy? Singapore uses a hedging strategy of strategic pragmatism and institutionalized trust to advance defense cooperation while maintaining regional equidistance.

To analyze Singaporean coping with great power competition, international relations (IR) theoretical frameworks employed include realism, liberal institutionalism, and strategic hedging. Realism is a strong argument for lasting Singapore-US defense cooperation, based on national interest and power balancing logic, particularly amid growing US-China strategic rivalry. By contrast, liberal institutionalism highlights the role of multilateralism and institutional engagement in shaping Singapore's foreign policy, stemming from regional forums and rule-based cooperation.

The core concept of strategic hedging is the primary analytical lens. Especially pertinent to small states, hedging helps Singapore adopt apparently contradictory policies, simultaneously engaging and distancing from major powers without unequivocally committing to one side. Singaporean foreign policy duality relies on America for security guarantees, while strengthening economic ties with China. Strategic hedging integrates realist concerns about power dynamics with liberal expectations of institutional trust and normative engagement. The goal is to obtain a nuanced understanding of Singapore's strategic behavior during years of geopolitical uncertainty.

2. Literature Review

The literature covers strategic and operational dimensions of US-Singapore defense cooperation, but few studies explore how Singapore manages alliances in a context of systemic rivalry. Most focus on institutional outputs (agreements, training exercises), with limited attention to domestic, ideational, and normative underpinnings of Singaporean strategic calculus. The

present study offers a theoretically grounded interpretation of Singapore's hedging strategy. It applies three complementary frameworks: a) realism, explaining the pursuit of national interests and survival amid great-power competition; b) liberal institutionalism, highlighting the role of institutions, norms, and multilateral engagement in mitigating asymmetries; and c) strategic hedging theory, integrating these perspectives to evoke Singaporean pragmatic balancing between the US and China. Combining these approaches adds to ongoing debates about small-state agency, strategic autonomy, and institutionalized trust in asymmetric alliances.

From 2004 to 2024, US-Singapore security and defense cooperation became the basis of a wider strategic partnership. The evolving relationship involved collaborative commitment to regional stability, military engagement, and defense initiatives. In 2005, a strong security relationship was ratified with a Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), codifying mutual defense ties. The US-Singapore Joint Leaders' Statement (2022) noted that the SFA granted the US military access to Singaporean facilities, boosting cooperation on joint training exercises, intelligence sharing, and rapid response mechanisms during regional crises. It also created a basis for future defense collaborations, heightening Singapore's role as an Asia-Pacific strategic partner (US Department of State, 2024).

One factor driving this cooperation is the regional security environment, which increasingly demands a proactive, multifaceted defense approach. Both nations see a shared challenge in the spreading influence of China and erratic Indo-Pacific security dynamics. Accordingly, Singapore's balanced defense policy relies on partnerships such as the one with America. As Liu and Tran (2024) note, Singapore's foreign policy centers on hedging security arrangements by maintaining strong US links to counterbalance regional precarity.

Defense cooperation comprises military exercises and joint initiatives. Since 2017, Exercise Pacific Griffin, a naval training event between US and Singaporean naval forces, has been held biennially. It builds mutual trust and military capability (US Pacific Fleet, 2023). Additionally, Exercise Valiant Mark (XVM) is a critical training exercise between Singaporean armed forces and US Marines, reinforcing shared operational integration in expeditionary and joint operations (US Marine Corps Forces, 2023). These interactions help maintain respective readiness to cope with regional security threats.

In 2015, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) was signed, advancing defense technology cooperation. Technological and cybersecurity collaboration were

deepened in research and development (R&D), cyber defense, and military logistics. Singaporean purchase of US military high technology defense systems, including fighter jets and maritime surveillance equipment, has modernized its defense capabilities (Fischer, 2023). The Fiscal Year 2023 US Arms Transfers and Defense Trade Fact Sheet cited Singapore as a key purchaser of cutting-edge US defense systems.

As part of Singapore's foreign policy legacy, Barr (2022) describes the US-Singapore security partnership as a collaborative model balancing national interest with growing security challenges. In a region divided by competing superpowers, Singapore as a non-aligned, security-oriented state requires diplomatic cooperation and defense arrangements.

Trade and military agreements also reflect broader strategic US policy shifts, favoring long-term alliances and defense diplomacy. RHaass (2022) and *Defense Cooperation* (US Embassy Singapore, 2021) deem this mutual reliance as cohering with US Indo-Pacific strategy, reaffirming Washington as safeguard of regional stability in the South China Sea.

The literature clarifies that US-Singapore collaboration transcends military transactions. The dynamic cooperation reflects shared interests in maritime security, defense technology, and regional stability. The two nations share a pragmatic strategic approach to dealing with an evolving global security environment.

Between 2004 and 2024, the US-Singapore defense relationship expressed the strength of strategic partnership in a volatile global landscape; shared values and resources were leveraged to meet complex security challenges. The literature concludes that mutual trust, advanced technology, and collaborative defense strategy have endured as the basis for the alliance.

Although the literature provides details about operational dimensions of US-Singapore defense cooperation, critical analysis is lacking of underlying strategy, theoretical framing, and implications for small-state behavior in a contested Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the present research offers a theory-informed, critically engaged analysis.

3. Methodology

A synthetic approach is used to trace the evolution from 2004 to 2024 of US-Singapore security and defense cooperation. Omitting primary data such as elite interviews or fieldwork limiting the presentation of insider perspectives, the synthetic method nevertheless identifies patterns and synthesizes an array of publicly available data.

Secondary sources integrated include government reports, defense agreements, academic articles, and official documents. Key primary sources include significant treaties such as the Strategic Framework (2005) and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreements (2015) as well as reports from the US Indo-Pacific Command, Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and US government publications. Synthesizing these materials highlights topics related to joint military exercises, training initiatives, arms sales, and technological partnerships.

Thematic analysis identifies key trends and patterns by scrutinizing strategic partnerships, geopolitical dynamics, and regional security concerns. Although mainly relying on secondary data, the synthetic approach cohesively integrates and synthesizes data to perceive the development of the US-Singapore defense relationship and its implications.

4. Results and Discussion

This section analyzes the evolution and dynamics of Singapore–US defense and security cooperation, drawing on official documents, policy statements, and scholarly assessments. It draws findings from multiple perspectives to explain how the partnership has adapted to shifting geopolitical contexts and strategic imperatives. Each topic integrates empirical results and interpretive discussion to indicate mechanisms, motivations, and implications of the enduring bilateral relationship.

4.1 Factors Influencing US-Singapore Security and Defense Cooperation

US-Singapore security cooperation is shaped by pragmatic and structural factors rooted in the latter's small-state vulnerability and strategic dependence on an open, rules-based regional order. Barr (2022) explains that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's foreign policy approach prioritized stability, autonomy, and credibility for Singaporean defense alignments. Singaporean leaders have long perceived the US presence as necessary for achieving security equilibrium in an unsettled region of major-power rivalry (Haass, 2022).

Simultaneously, Liu and Tran (2024) detail a hedging strategy in Singapore's pragmatic decision-making framework. This eschews overdependence while maintaining flexibility in foreign partnerships. Singapore's balancing act deepens US cooperation without committing to a formal alliance structure. The US Department of State (2024) counts Singapore among America's closest Southeast Asian security partners, offering access facilities, training support,

and logistical cooperation. These diverse factors of geography, vulnerability, pragmatism, and shared interest in a stable maritime order collectively explain the ongoing deepening of US–Singapore defense relations.

4.2 The Impact of the Regional and Global Security Environment on Singaporean National Security

The developing Indo-Pacific security environment with heightened US–China competition influences Singapore’s national defense. Lee (2024) asserts that Singapore’s security outlook is increasingly shaped by systemic rivalry and a need to safeguard open sea lanes from competing spheres of influence. Austin (2024) deems this environment a new Indo-Pacific convergence in which nations must strengthen multilateral defense to cooperatively manage risks.

Singapore’s response was to reinforce deterrence capabilities while expanding US and regional partner cooperative frameworks. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore (n.d.), reports the bilateral relationship as mutually interested in free navigation, counterterrorism, and defense modernization. Likewise, Haass (2022) observes that small states such as Singapore may be stabilizing agents by using principled, flexible diplomacy.

The regional context of South China Sea tensions, military assertiveness, and strategic realignments compels Singapore to continue defense engagement with America as a counteraction. By doing so, Singapore reaffirms its credible, trusted security status in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and steadies a wider Indo-Pacific equilibrium.

4.3 21st Century US Policy Adjustments Toward Southeast Asia

Since the 2000s, US-ASEAN policy adjustments have impacted US–Singapore defense relations. The US–Singapore Free Trade Agreement (2004) and Strategic Framework Agreement (2005) expanded military cooperation (US National Archives, 2005). These accords converged mutual economic and security interests.

Myers (2022) derives US-ASEAN engagement from episodic involvement to sustained strategic presence under the Indo-Pacific Strategy framework. The White House (2021; 2022) affirmed that Singapore was a critical security partner in defending maritime security and regional resilience. US State Department (2024) documents also recount how bilateral

cooperation implements American defense diplomacy revolving around interoperability, capacity-building, and institutional trust.

This US policy recalibration leveraged Singapore's strategic geography and defense professionalism as a reliable node for US operations and training. Such adjustments show how US regional strategies and Singaporean pragmatic diplomacy were mutually reinforced.

4.4 Singapore's Security Challenges and the US Response

Singapore's strategic vulnerabilities stemming from its size, resource limitations, and geopolitical location have necessitated security partnerships. Barr (2022) and Lee (2024) aver that Singaporean leaders have sought external equilibrium through selective US cooperation while preserving good relations with China. Liu and Tran (2024) term this dual-track strategy calibrated alignment, designed to minimize dependency while maximizing strategic gain.

The US has responded comprehensively to Singapore's security needs. The Defense Cooperation Factsheet (US Embassy in Singapore, 2021) includes a range of bilateral engagements, from counterterrorism collaboration to cybersecurity and maritime domain awareness. Austin (2024) reaffirmed that US commitments to regional security strengthen trusted partnerships with capable actors such as Singapore.

In these reciprocal arrangements, both states mutually benefit: Singapore accesses deterrence and technology, while the US obtains a reliable security partner in a turbulent region. This adaptable partnership based in pragmatism, not ideology, has sustained Singaporean resilience through decades of geopolitical transformation.

4.5 Evolving Bilateral Defense Cooperation Before and During Lee Hsien Loong's Prime Ministership

Since the 1990s, US–Singapore defense cooperation has transformed from ad hoc military access to institutionalized strategic partnership. The 1990 Memorandum of Understanding and 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement established legal bases for US military rotational access and training on Singapore (US National Archives, 2005). During Lee Hsien Loong's prime ministership, this cooperation grew with advanced technology sharing and joint exercises.

White House (2022) and US State Department (2024) documents observed that Lee's government deepened military interoperability while diversifying Singapore's defense relations

with partners such as Australia and India. However, the US remained the cornerstone of Singapore's defense modernization efforts, as reflected in the enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) and continued logistical support for US regional operations.

This long-term bilateral cooperation survived regime change and geopolitical cycles. Singapore's balance of autonomy and alignment gave its US defense partnership stability and adaptability.

4.6 Legal and Institutional Frameworks for Bilateral Defense Cooperation

The US–Singapore defense partnership was institutionalized by binding agreements, memoranda, and frameworks facilitating lasting cooperation. The US Embassy in Singapore (2021) identified key instruments, including a 1990 memorandum of understanding (MOU), 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement, and 2015 Enhanced DCA. These documents codified the terms of access, logistics, and training arrangements, ensuring continuous, transparent defense collaboration.

Legal frameworks were complemented by institutional mechanisms such as the annual Strategic Security Policy Dialogue and joint working groups. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore (n.d.) characterized these platforms as allowing both sides to address emerging issues of cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and maritime safety. The US Indo-Pacific Command (n.d.) represented these mechanisms as reflecting shared values of professionalism, mutual respect, and capacity-building.

By embedding cooperation in legal and institutional structures, both nations mitigated political risks and unpredictability. This institutional density explains why the US–Singapore security relationship has thrived amid global uncertainty.

4.7 Key Defense Activities: Joint Exercises, Training, and Technology Cooperation

Defining features of Singapore–US defense relations are regular joint military exercises and training programs. Pacific Griffin and Valiant Mark demonstrate interoperability and shared strategic objectives (Moore, 2023; US Marine Corps Forces, Pacific, 2023). These engagements, including air, naval, and ground components, enhance mutual readiness and trust.

Training collaboration is equally central. The Republic of Singapore Air Force's F-15SG fighter detachment in the US, inaugurated in 2009 (MINDEF Singapore, 2009), exemplifies Singapore's commitment to professional military education and technology integration.

Owens (2023) contended that the Cope Tiger and Commando Sling exercises enforced tactical cooperation, ensuring compatibility with US systems and doctrines.

Technology and defense trade complement these activities. The Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (2023) and the US State Department (2023) ranked Singapore among the top regional consumers of advanced US defense systems, reflecting trust in American technology. These operational, training, and technological links form the basis of the bilateral defense partnership.

4.8 High-Level Exchanges, Arms Trade, and Emerging Cooperative Mechanisms

High-level political and military exchange have reinforced US-Singapore strategic trust. The White House (2022) Joint Leaders' Statement and Lee Hsien Loong's dialogues with US presidents from George W. Bush to Joe Biden evidenced an ongoing collaborative commitment. Such exchanges affirm a political will behind defense cooperation, platforming policy coordination.

Arms trading further strengthens the defense relationship. The US State Department (2023) saw Singapore's purchase of advanced munitions and precision-guided systems as revealing operational sophistication meeting US standards. This cooperation expanded into new domains of cybersecurity, space situational awareness, and green defense technology.

Emerging cooperation mechanisms such as defense innovation and personnel exchange signal a forward-looking partnership. Austin (2024) and Haass (2022) predicted that sustained US-Singapore collaboration will remain central to regional stability as representing capable, principled partners. By combining political trust, technological integration, and institutional flexibility, the US-Singapore defense relationship offers an adaptive model of small-state engagement in a complex multipolar environment.

5. Conclusion

As the US-Singapore partnership institutionalized and diversified, it remained vulnerable to regional geopolitical shifts and leadership changes in both countries. Singapore must continually adapt its hedging strategy to maintain autonomy and alignment in a tempestuous Indo-Pacific. Ultimately, small states navigate security in a competitive environment through robust, flexible partnerships:

1) The SFA (2005) was a milestone, providing legal foundation for wider cooperation in diverse areas. This agreement allowed US forces to use Singaporean military facilities and expanded joint exercises and intelligence sharing, coordination, and swift emergency response capabilities.

2) The EDCA (2015) further solidified the strategic relationship, expanding defense technology, cybersecurity, and training cooperation. This boosted Singapore's defense power and reinforced American military presence and influence in Southeast Asia.

3) Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) and Tiger Balm joint exercises continuously improved operational capabilities and coordination for both nations' armed forces. These exercises enhanced shared military proficiency and addressed common security challenges.

Finally, high-level Singapore and US military delegations frequently exchanged visits, building mutual trust and understanding.

In sum, during the Lee Hsien Loong prime ministership, US-Singapore defense and security cooperation strengthened both countries' maintenance of regional stability and addressed complex security challenges.

Future research might examine domestic constraints as well as strategic culture, and comparatively analyze this partnership with others regionally.

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