

We find ourselves in an immensely complex world where threats and issues are multifaceted. Today, crises involve multiple domains -- military, security, economic, health, climate, technological etc., and the global order is under severe strain.

In this issue of News In Focus, we look at events in March which explore how Singapore is preparing itself to face a wide array of issues in the near future.

Key Highlights from Committee of Supply Debate 2023: Securing Our Future in a Complex Geo-political Environment

Here are some of the key highlights on the geo-political developments and defence priorities from the debates:

US-China Tensions



Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan said that the US-China relationship represents a “fundamental deficit of strategic trust, rooted in incompatible worldviews and aggravated by their respective domestic political pressures.”

- Both sides are now locked in intense competition across multiple domains, such as tech. The Taiwan Strait also remains a dangerous flashpoint for more intense forms of US-China conflict.
- Effective communication between the US and China is vital to manage risk in global affairs. Singapore will not escape the consequences of a worsening of US-China mutual interdependence, with the US being the largest foreign investor in Singapore, and Singapore being one of the largest investors in China.
- Singapore, like many other countries in our region, does not wish to be forced to choose sides and desire good relations with both countries.



“ Given the grave implications for the world, we, like most countries, hope that the US and China work out a modus vivendi between themselves. ”

Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at COS 2023

Foreign and Defence Diplomacy

Multilateralism continues to be relevant today. As a small state, the observance of international law is vital to Singapore’s sovereignty and independence.

- Singapore must continue advocating for multilateralism by supporting the UN. We play a significant role in developing international ocean laws, cyberspace, and even outer space. To this end, a number of Singaporeans hold important roles in various UN working groups and task forces.



Mr Burhan Gafoor, Singapore Permanent Representative to the UN chairing the UN Cybersecurity Open-Ended Working Group



MFA and MINDEF are working hard to improve regional cooperation and address common challenges. ASEAN, as the regional architecture, must remain “united, coherent, and credible”.

- Singapore will support Indonesia in its role as ASEAN chair this year and its agenda to step up ASEAN integration in the green economy and digital field. Singapore will also assist Timor-Leste in its application for ASEAN membership.
- The ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) had agreed to establish the ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence, which will be launched in Singapore in Q3 2023.
- Singapore will also be hosting the 20th edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) this year. The SLD is Asia’s premier security dialogue, and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese will deliver the keynote address this year.

Investing in Defence and Building the SAF for 2024

- Defence is a long-term business, and requires consistent investment over time. Steady investment in defence is the more prudent and cost-effective strategy, especially during good times and peace.
- MINDEF-SAF is making good progress building the SAF for 2024 and beyond. More platforms and capabilities will be added in the next decade as the SAF continues to work towards SAF2040.



“ A strong SAF did not come about by chance. The capability and commitment of men and women in the SAF, together with the support of Singaporeans over the years, ensured that the SAF remained strong and able to defend Singapore and Singaporeans. ”

Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen at MINDEF COS 2023

Exercise Northstar: Preparing for the Real Threat of Terrorism

Exercise Northstar is a multi-agency counter-terrorism exercise. The 11th edition of Exercise Northstar took place on 22 March 2023 at Jurong Island.

This year's exercise featured a terrorist attack scenario whereby a group of self-radicalised individuals planted improvised explosive devices on large oil tanks and chemical pipelines at Jurong Island. The subsequent explosions ruptured pipelines along the Keppel Service Corridor, which led to large fires and chlorine gas being 'released'.



More than 300 members from various agencies and stakeholders were activated for the exercise:

- The SCDF deployed their latest-generation modular oil tank firefighting system, and also showcased its full suite of hazardous material capabilities, including the different personal protective equipment and its Ventilation Vehicle.
- The Singapore Armed Forces' In-situ 9th Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment (9 SIR) formed the first wave of responders, and SAF ambulances were used to convey casualties, while the Ministry of Health's disaster site medical command and field medical teams were present to help.
- Police officers from the Ground Response Force and Emergency Response Team also took over command and control of the situation, subsequently neutralising the perpetrators. The police coast guard vessels also managed to intercept some perpetrators who tried to escape.



SCDF's Ventilation Vehicle dispersing the chemical plume during HazMat incidents.



PM Lee Hsien Loong was present to witness the exercise. He cautioned that "there are activities in the region around us", and Singapore is on the radar when it comes to the threat of terrorism. Already, we have seen cases of homegrown self-radicalised individuals, and Singapore has to "take these exercises very seriously" in order to deal with a range of terrorist threats.



“ Because the threat of terrorism isn't just the person who's hurt, or the oil storage tank which is blown up, or the pipeline, but the fracture in our society, which takes a very, very long time to heal... And we must never let that fracture happen to us. ”

PM Lee Hsien Loong at Exercise Northstar XI

Singapore Defence Technology Summit 2023: Countries Must Work Together to Harness New Technologies

Singapore hosted the 4th Singapore Defence Technology Summit, which took place from 22 to 24 March 2023. Themed “Digital and Dual-Use Technologies: Opportunities and Threats”, there was an “overwhelming response” for the summit which brought together more than 1,400 in-person and virtual participants from over 25 countries, including the US, China, the UK, Germany, France, and the ROK. Here are some key highlights from the summit:

- Amidst an era of heightened geopolitical contestation and the erosion of strategic trust between countries, it is even more important for countries to come together to engage in dialogue.
- Commercial technologies are quickly finding applications in the military realm, and are being used in “unexpected and asymmetric ways on the battlefield”. For example, in Ukraine, the military used off-the-shelf drones developed for aerial photography hobbyists to attack Russian tanks with bombs and grenades.
- These trends blur the lines separating civilian and military technologies.



Speaking at the event, DPM Wong listed three opportunities and challenges:

1 Defence establishments will have to seriously consider how to integrate commercial technologies for defence and security needs. Procurement processes will have to be shortened as the most innovative companies are smaller start-ups and lack resources to engage in drawn-out procurement processes. Failure to adapt to this new reality would mean missing out on new capabilities or adopting obsolete solutions.

2 Defence establishments must guide commercial enterprises to ensure that new technologies contribute to collective security and not undermine it. One immediate issue is how governments should deal with Artificial Intelligence, which is a commercial technology that potentially will become a very powerful weapon for warfare. Governments, industry, and civil society must work together to set international principles, norms and guidelines to guide AI development.

3 Defence establishments will need to confront the expanding range of asymmetric threats brought about by new technologies, especially in cyber space, where malicious actors can exploit vulnerabilities in computer systems to launch attacks. Countries must work together to coordinate policy responses, share information, and conduct joint operations to improve collective resilience against cyber threats. In this region, the ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence strengthens the region’s research capabilities in this field.



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