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ABSTRACT

Amid the US-China rivalry, small states struggle to avoid aligning with the logic of great power competition while ensuring their security through self-reliance. This dilemma can be seen in regions like Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In this context, comparing the defense policies of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Singapore shows how universal these challenges are. Both countries face similar constraints regarding their armed forces' ability to operate independently, the propensity of their defense industries to develop indigenous capabilities, and the challenge of balancing self-sufficiency with maintaining close ties to the US. However, despite these similarities, the article also explains how and why the policies of the UAE and Singapore differ significantly.

Main Text

How do small states think and define their survival strategies? Can those strategies evolve over time? Given their vulnerabilities, the security dilemma of small states usually takes an existential dimension and forces their governments to design policies accordingly.[1] IR Scholarship tends to reduce this dilemma to the often quoted citation from Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War: "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."[2] In essence, small states are defined by their negative attributes, i.e. limited assets in terms of natural or human characteristics (territory, demography, resources).[3] Previous studies suggest that to balance against a close threat, those "lilleputian" states have no choice but to "bandwagon" with a greater power and merely act as "satellite states" in the global competition.[4] In recent years, scholarly interest in this security dilemma has resurfaced as the competition between the US and China intensified and as both sides increasingly forced smaller states to align themselves with the competition.[5] However, tying the safety of a country to the belief that an external power will come to the rescue if needed has obvious limitations. It creates a dependency that, over time, can also engender its own risks.

In recent years, this dilemma of small states led to a revived interest in the concept of "strategic autonomy" among policymakers – though its theoretical contours remain uncertain. In 2016, the European Union provided its official definition as its "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible," which hardly clarified the provisions of the concept.[6] In the academic literature, the term "autonomy" is often meant in opposition to dependence. It implies the "ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone."[7] Autonomy is not a fixed status like sovereignty, that refers to the principle in international law that a state cannot be subject to external pressures. Strategic autonomy implies the ability to rely on its own armed forces for political objectives. Specifically, it requires the "capacity to independently plan and conduct military operations (. . .) and to autonomously develop and produce the related defense capabilities with minimal

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or no assistance" from external partners.[8] Although it would be difficult to draw a clear line between where strategic autonomy ends and where external dependence starts, the concept captures the ambitions of many small states to strengthen their ability to decide on their own and not to find themselves at the mercy of their external patron. It also relates to what Harlan Koff and Thomas Kolnberger call the "vulnerability-agency paradox" of small state, highlighting the fact despite their intrinsic vulnerability, small states can still exercise a certain level of agency.[9]

Much of the contemporary literature on strategic autonomy centers on Europe, but the small state conundrum can be observed across many regions of the world, such as Southeast Asia and the Arabian Gulf. Within ASEAN, countries have long cultivated different policies toward both Washington and Beijing; some maintain close defense ties to the US (e.g., Philippines, Thailand, Singapore), while others (Cambodia, Laos) embrace the business opportunities brought about by the rise of China.[10] In the past decade, the six Arabian Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman) have experienced a similar predicament. At first, following their independence in the early 1970s, Gulf states relied primarily on Western security partners – particularly the US – for the stability of their regimes.[11] However, this calculus changed later, especially as Gulf confidence in the US willingness to uphold its security commitments eroded. As a result, aspirations of Gulf states toward "strategic autonomy," grew in earnest.[12]

This quest for autonomy has grown against the backdrop of a US-China competition intensifying both in the Gulf and Southeast Asia, and across all domains (diplomacy, trade, military cooperation). Because most of the local states are considered small states (except regional powers like Indonesia or Saudi Arabia), they face the dilemma described above in an acute way. The scholarship on Southeast Asia has often delved into the details of this great power competition.[13] However, the topic is relatively new in the Gulf, where Chinese presence and influence only grew in earnest in the past decade.[14] In this context, two countries stand out for their ambition to escape this dilemma: the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Singapore.[15]

There are several reasons why a comparison between the UAE and Singapore is worth exploring to discuss how small states seek to achieve self-reliance. Both are relatively young states that were established around the same time (1965 for Singapore and 1971 for the UAE). They face similar challenges, such as proximity to regional powers, absence of strategic depth, and a limited pool of citizens to man their armed forces. As a result, the comparison of both the Singaporean and Emirati experiences in strategic autonomy enables us to go beyond the assumed specificity of the Gulf or Southeast Asia and to reveal the similarities of some of the challenges to the political goal of self-reliance. But as our research shows, the comparison also sheds light on the very distinct ways in which both states address their small-state predicament.

At the methodological level, our study aims to balance two competing issues in comparative analysis: the belief in false uniqueness – the assumption that the country under study is exceptional in its history, culture, and political system – and the belief in false universalism, which is the notion that rational choices and the objective structure of the international system primarily dictate strategic decisions.[16] This approach allows us to recognize the structural challenges that two small states like the UAE and Singapore, from regions as different as the Gulf and Southeast Asia, encounter when addressing their security issues while assessing how their local context influences the decisions made by each state government.

Specifically, our research shows that both countries struggle with similar limitations to the operational ability of their armed forces to act on their own, the capacity of their local defense industrial base to produce truly indigenous capabilities for those armed forces, and the possibility for both governments to find the right balance between strengthening their self-sufficiency and preserving close ties with the US. Notwithstanding those similarities, the policies pursued by the UAE and Singapore also significantly differ, especially regarding the greater propensity of the Emirati government to challenge US demands vis-à-vis its economic and military cooperation with China.

Against that backdrop, this article starts by comparing the threat assessments driving the national security policies of both countries since their independence. The second section takes a closer look at how national militaries in Singapore and the UAE have been built regarding force structure. Whereas Singapore has developed a strong military culture as a means of self-reliance, the UAE only invested in the readiness of its troops in recent years. Then, the third section investigates how the growth of a local defense industry partially succeeded in consolidating the principle of self-reliance in both countries. When push comes to shove, the local defense industry, be it in Singapore or Abu Dhabi, remains constrained by the difficulties of small states in affording the cost of developing and producing their own defense systems. In the fourth section, we look at how those self-reliance strategies impact the civil-military relations in both countries, in particular when it comes to conscription programs. Whereas national service has been a pillar of Singapore's political identity since 1965, the UAE introduced a similar program in 2014. Finally, the fifth section discusses how both countries tread a delicate path between strategic autonomy and their enduring reliance on external security providers – namely the US.

Similarities in the Emirati and Singaporean Security Environments

Both the UAE and Singapore face major geographic and demographic constraints. On the one hand, the small Gulf state includes approximately ten million inhabitants (of which local citizens represent 11.6%) on a 83 600 sq. km territory. On the other hand, the Asian city-state is home to six million residents (roughly 3.6 million citizens) on a 719 sq. km island. At the same time, both are surrounded by regional powers: the UAE borders Saudi Arabia on its Western flank and faces Iran on the other side of the Persian Gulf, whereas Singapore is situated between Malaysia (from which Singapore separated in 1965) and Indonesia.

As a result, the proximity of regional powers has been a major driver of Emirati and Singaporean national security policies. Abu Dhabi traditionally looked suspiciously at Iran's foreign policy, in particular Tehran's use of proxy militias across the Middle East (in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or Bahrain).[17] The long-running territorial dispute between the UAE and Iran over the latter's occupation of three Emirati islands (Abu Musa, the Great Tunb, and the Lesser Tunb) adds a sense of historical grievance that has long played a role in Emirati identity-building.[18] Moreover, Iran's ballistic missiles – arguably, the most advanced arsenal in the Gulf – shape Abu Dhabi's perception of a concrete and immediate threat since those weapons can easily reach the UAE's main urban centers. For instance, the island Abu Musa, controlled by Iran, is about 50 km from the UAE coast.[19]

On the other side, relations between the UAE and Saudi Arabia have also been complicated. Following the foundation of the UAE in 1971, both countries were at odds. An unresolved border dispute regarding the Buraimi oasis escalated in 2009 with Saudi border guards denying access to the territory to Emirati nationals holding ID cards that showed a map of the UAE, including a territory administered by Saudi Arabia.[20] Nevertheless, after the Arab revolutions of 2011, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh seemingly got closer to each other. Both states led the regional struggle against Islamist forces. They both supported the military takeover led by Marshall Sisi in Egypt in 2013 and fiercely opposed Turkey and Qatar across the Middle East (going as far as to impose a blockade on the latter between 2017 and 2021).[21] Saudi and Emirati forces also worked together in Yemen following Riyadh's decision to launch a military intervention against the Houthi insurgency in 2015. Eventually, this Saudi Emirati rapprochement culminated in early December 2017 with the announcement of a formal political and military alliance between both countries.[22] Still, tensions did not vanish. Throughout the war in Yemen, the UAE supported southern factions that opposed the Yemeni government in exile backed by Saudi Arabia.[23] In the realm of trade, Saudi Arabia has been demanding international firms relocate their regional headquarters to Riyadh to strengthen the economic diversification plans of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.[24] The measure directly affects Dubai, which has been the regional commercial hub until today.[25]

In a similar fashion, Singapore has faced disputes with Malaysia and Indonesia. Since Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965, tensions occasionally flared between both states, in particular regarding two water agreements signed in 1962 that enabled Singapore to treat and use water from the territory of Johor in southern Malaysia.[26] In the subsequent years, governments in Kuala Lumpur frequently denounced the conditions of the agreements, perceived as more favorable to the Singaporean side. Because Singapore heavily depends on that water supply, its government repeatedly suggested that reneging on the agreements would trigger military escalation – though the scenario never materialized.[27]

Singapore's relations with Indonesia were also difficult at first. The separation between Singapore and Malaysia coincided with the so-called "Konfrontasi" (confrontation) period. Konfrontasi was an armed conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia that lasted from 1963 to 1966. It followed the rejection by Indonesian President Sukarno of the creation of the then Federation of Malaya (including today's Malaysia and Singapore). Though most of the clashes occurred on the island of Borneo, Singapore was targeted on 10 March 1965 with the MacDonald House bombing that killed three people and injured 33 others. The Indonesian saboteurs were later arrested by Singaporean police and sentenced to death.[28]

To this day, the event left a scar on Indonesia-Singapore relations. Even if diplomatic relations improved after Sukarno was replaced by Suharto in 1967, the episode was not forgotten: in 2014, Indonesia's government's decision to name a new warship after the perpetrators of the bombing stirred a diplomatic crisis. As a result, Singapore canceled joint military exercises and banned the Indonesian warship from its naval facilities.[29]

Overall, difficult – and sometimes hostile – relations with neighbors shaped the national security policies of the UAE and Singapore. It also led both states to attach limited trust to regional security institutions. In the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), founded in 1981, has struggled to cement ties at a strategic level between its member states, partly because smaller states like the UAE fear that Saudi Arabia uses the GCC as an extension of its own national agenda.[30] With regard to Singapore, its government has been an active contributor to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since its creation in 1967. Although ASEAN has been more successful than the GCC in areas like economic integration, the regional body has also shown limitations regarding security matters, such as the various maritime disputes in the South China Sea involving member states like Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Brunei, as well as the People's Republic of China.[31]

This does not mean that the UAE and Singapore reject regional initiatives, but it shows that their governments have assessed that they cannot realistically rely on multilateral arrangements for their national security. In both cases, multilateralism is perceived as a necessary but insufficient means of protection. Multilateral initiatives enable small states like the UAE and Singapore to shape their regional environment and cultivate the idea that governance and international law are to be followed by all stakeholders. But eventually, they do not compensate for the need to build their own defenses by other means.

Different Ambitions for Local Armed Forces

Defining realistic missions for armed forces in the context of small states is a delicate exercise, especially when surrounded by neighbors many times bigger. In terms of geography, Indonesia is about 2648 times bigger than Singapore, while Saudi Arabia is 26 times bigger than the UAE.

Due to this absence of strategic depth, Singapore looked in its first years at the Israeli model as an inspiration for its own military posture: starting in 1965, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) sent advisers who helped build the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), from the introduction of its national service program to the tactical training of soldiers.[32] To avoid a backlash, either internally from Singapore's Muslim community or externally from Malaysia's government, the Israeli contribution to the SAF was kept quiet until the publication of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs in 2000.[33] The Israelis did not only play an instrumental role in the training of the SAF, but they also influenced

Singaporean views on self-reliance. In both countries, deterrence has been considered a cornerstone of national security, one whose failure can have existential consequences.[34] As a result, the SAF were primarily designed to deter an invasion of the island.[35]

This posture was also based on an idea articulated by Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in 1966. According to Lee's words, "there are various types of shrimps. Some shrimps stay alive . . . Species in nature develop defence mechanisms. Some shrimps are poisonous: they sting. If you eat them, you will get digestive upsets."[36] The "poisonous shrimp" metaphor acknowledged the inescapable asymmetry between Singapore and its potential adversaries. Still, it posited that the SAF could develop techniques that would make any attempt at invading the island unbearable for the aggressor. To do so, all Singaporeans – not only the professional soldiers – were to play a role in that strategy. Just like Israel, Singapore relied on reserve units to field its army. As Lee wrote in his memoirs, "the best deterrent to any Malaysian plan to regain control over Singapore was their knowledge that even if they could subdue our armed forces, they would have to keep down a whole people well trained in the use of arms and explosives."[37]

This "poisonous shrimp" posture was central to Singapore's military strategy till the 1980s. By then, decision-makers took stock of the technology and efficiency gap achieved by the SAF vis-a-vis its neighbors. A new strategy, this time coined "porcupine strategy," emerged. Arguably, a porcupine is considered "a harmless creature if left on its own" but capable of "inflicting pain on an aggressor and still surviving the attack."[38] The porcupine metaphor now suggested that the SAF could shift to a strategy of deterrence by denial.[39] It also reflected the growing Singaporean technological edge vis-a-vis its neighbors and how this enabled its decision-makers to compensate for the manpower shortage of a small state.[40]

Whereas Singapore's former officials have documented the establishment of their armed forces, there is much less information on the evolution of military posture in the UAE. For the first two decades of its existence, the UAE Armed Forces – or, as they were initially called, the Union Defence Force – had only limited missions. This resulted from several internal issues, such as traditional suspicions from the rulers regarding the empowerment of the military and its consequences for the likelihood of a coup.[41] It is worth noting that its neighbor, Saudi Arabia, faced a failed coup attempt led by officers of the Royal Saudi Air Force in 1969 – only two years before the creation of the UAE.[42]

Suspicions were also a consequence of the long process of centralization by Abu Dhabi of all regalian functions. In 1971, most of the personnel from the Union Defence Force originated from Abu Dhabi, and rulers relied on British and Jordanian officers to serve in commanding positions.[43] Dubai maintained its own armed forces till 1996, making the development of an ambitious national defense strategy impossible. In other words, Emirati armed forces during the 1970s, the 1980s, and most of the 1990s were primarily used for state-building purposes but not national defense *per se*.[44] There was not to be an Emirati "poisonous shrimp" strategy.

However, in the 2000s, after Abu Dhabi consolidated its primacy within the Federation, ambitions for the national armed forces grew. This coincided with the rise of Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who became Abu Dhabi's crown prince in 2004. Educated at the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst, Mohammed bin Zayed aimed to change the perception of the UAE armed forces from a praetorian or bureaucratic institution into a credible organization able to join international coalitions. To do so, it had to undergo a process of modernization.

This involved several ambitious initiatives. First, the government changed the old Emiri Guard and rebranded it the Presidential Guard in 2011. Under the helm of Mohammed bin Zayed, the new military unit was designed not only to secure the country's critical infrastructures but also to develop expeditionary skills that could be used in foreign interventions. To that aim, Abu Dhabi turned to the US Marine Corps to provide training support to the Presidential Guard.[45] Later, at the height of the UAE's involvement in the Yemen war, the Presidential Guard played a central role in the country's war effort.[46]

But if in its early years, the UAE military posture was more modest than the Singaporean one, a major shift occurred in the 2010s. In May 2015, Mohammed bin Zayed explained in a speech to the

UAE Armed Forces that their missions would include not only territorial defense but also expeditionary operations on a scale unprecedented for an Arab country of the UAE's size: "Our responsibility is not limited to our homeland, and we feel a great sense of responsibility towards the security of our sisterly Arab nations."[47] Three months before the speech, the UAE had joined the Saudi-led coalition to oust the Houthis from Yemen. No such rhetoric can be found in statements from Singaporean officials. The latter tend to a more restrictive use of armed forces that include only modest participation in overseas operations. However, the Emirati ambition eventually backfired, as the Yemen war demonstrated significant operational, strategic, and diplomatic issues. Emirati troops proved unable to hold territories previously conquered from the Houthis, leading General Hindmarsh – a former Australian Special Forces Commander in charge of the UAE Presidential Guard – to reportedly tell American journalists that the war in Yemen may well have been "the Vietnam of Gulf countries and the Houthis their Viet-Cong."[48]

Here, the contrast between Singapore and the UAE is remarkable: whereas Singapore's military culture is much older than the UAE, the latter has expanded the role it assigns to its armed forces in the past two decades. As a result, the UAE armed forces have gained significant warfighting experience that the SAF do not have.

Common Limitations of "Localizing" Defense Industries in Small States

Previous scholarship has shown how investing in a country's national defense industry fulfills several goals, such as securing access to supplies, stimulating the local economy, and cultivating national pride through technological achievements.[49] Those motivations can be found in both the Emirati and Singaporean contemporary contexts, though the trajectory of their military industries has also differed.

Singapore started developing its defense industry in the mid-1960s, right after its independence. Early on, both Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee – Singapore's first minister for interior and defense – considered that to compensate for its geographic and demographic weaknesses, the Singaporean Armed Forces (SAF) had to gain a technological edge over its neighbors. In other words, military technology would act as "a critical force multiplier."[50] This emphasized air and naval capabilities to avoid a "rifleman's war" at all costs.[51] As a result, the SAF strongly emphasized technical modernization. In today's environment, those technologies include "stealth, stand-off precision weaponry, unmanned systems, C4ISTAR [command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance, and targeting acquisition], training and protection technologies."[52]

However, such emphasis on fielding technologically advanced platforms did not mean that Singapore sought full self-sufficiency at the industrial level. To this day, the country still relies on imports for its most important platforms (e.g., F-35 fighter jets, Leopard tanks, or *La Fayette*-class frigates). Meanwhile, its local industry is usually tasked with the production and maintenance of imported weapons systems.[53] According to the 2021 annual report from the Singapore Ministry of Defence, its preference remains "to upgrade existing platforms to extend their lifespan and enhance their fighting capabilities instead of purchasing new ones unless the new equipment provides clearly superior and needed capabilities."[54] As a result, Richard Bitzinger notes that "most of the indigenous weapons systems coming out of Singaporean arms factories are remarkably prosaic in terms of technology and function; only rarely do Singaporean military systems approach the state-of-the-art."[55]

Against that backdrop, the primary player in Singapore's defense market continues to be Singapore Technologies (ST) Engineering. Founded in 1967 under the name "Charted Industries of Singapore," it was initially conceived as an ammunition manufacturer. In 2022, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ranked ST Engineering the 55th arms producing company in the world, far behind American, European, Chinese, or Israeli entities but above all Gulf companies.[56] Depending on the domains, ST Engineering relies on several local subcontractors. The company is divided into four main subsidiaries: ST Aerospace (STAe; aircraft manufacturing and maintenance); ST Electronics (communications, sensors, software, and combat systems); ST Kinetics (land systems and ordnance);

and ST Marine (shipbuilding). In 2022, it employed about 23,000 people, and its total revenues reached US$ 6.554 billion.

With regard to the UAE, the country only expressed its desire to cultivate the goal of industrial self-reliance in the last decade. It was the first Gulf state to raise its profile in the field of the defense industry, particularly after the creation of a holding company, the Emirates Defence Industries Company, in 2014, later absorbed by EDGE Group in 2019. EDGE now controls over 25 subsidiaries operating in many sectors, such as cyber defense, a naval shipyard, space technologies, and armored vehicles.[57]

Among the various local defense companies, AMMROC – an acronym standing for Advanced Military Maintenance Repair and Overhaul Center – was established as a joint venture between Mubadala – one of Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth funds – Sikorsky, and Lockheed Martin. AMMROC initially focused on basic tasks such as military maintenance and repair services for the UAE Air Force. Progressively, the company moved beyond mere maintenance work to retain the capability to modify and update aircraft types. A partnership with Lockheed Martin allowed it to gain the ability for local assembly of imported systems. Then, the modification of foreign platforms enabled AMMROC to "indigenize" them: this is the case with a new weaponized version of the Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter the company developed in 2019.[58]

Similarly, Abu Dhabi Ship Building (ADSB), initially focused on naval repairs and refits, provided corvettes for the UAE Navy. Delivering a naval platform was a major leap forward, but the Emirati company relied on a joint venture with French-based Constructions Mécaniques de Normandie to achieve this goal. Finally, NIMR, a company founded in 2000, positioned itself as a manufacturer of wheeled military vehicles that were designed, produced, and assembled in its factory inside the emirate of Abu Dhabi. The design of its various classes of vehicles, Ajban, Hafeet, and Jais, was similar to those of US armored vehicles but with variants in size and technologies.[59]

Despite the lofty ambitions of the Emirati defense industry, it faces limitations that resonate with those that the Singaporean companies have confronted for several decades. In both cases, self-reliance may be conceivable for developing and producing niche markets such as military technologies like cyberdefense, or unmanned systems – even though parts of such products will still need to be imported. However, the production of more advanced platforms, such as frigates and fighter jets, remains beyond the capacities of the Emirati and Singaporean industrial base. Moreover, both countries tend to rely on external partners for research and development, an activity usually deemed expensive and risky. It means that in both cases, appropriation of foreign military technologies, rather than local innovation, is still the primary course of action. Eventually, this implies that self-reliance at the industrial level remains a difficult, if not impossible, objective for small states. From a commercial standpoint, designing and producing major platforms for one unique (and small) customer is not sustainable. As a result, the achievements of entities such as ST Engineering and EDGE reflect the necessary compromises made by decision-makers regarding goals like self-sufficiency.

The Various Paths of Conscription Programs in Singapore and the UAE

It is possibly in the field of national service that the Singaporean and Emirati experiences differ the most. From the outset, Singapore chose a conscription model and introduced a national service. In 1965, as the newly established State separated from Malaysia, its pool of available soldiers was extremely limited. Lee Kuan Yew lamented, "All that I have got is two battalions, and the Indonesians have got 400,000 armed men."[60] Here as well, the Singaporean reliance on reservists was greatly influenced by the Israeli experience. As Goh Keng Swee recalls, Yaakov Elazari, the then head of the Israeli military mission to Singapore, was unequivocal: "Singapore must have a National Service force."[61] As a result, all male Singapore citizens and permanent residents were, and still are, required to serve their national service for two years. Afterward, they are required to serve up to 40 days of "operationally ready national service" per year till the age of 50 years for officers and 40 years for lower ranks. This slightly differs from the Israeli system, where women

must serve two years and men 32 months. After this, Israelis can be called up to reserve units until age 40.

In addition to its national service program, the Singaporean government launched various initiatives to raise the level of awareness of security affairs within its population. Starting in 1969, the city-state paid homage to its soldiers with the SAF Day Parade occurring on 1 July (the day of the founding of the SAF). This was expanded in 1984 with the introduction of Singapore's "total defence" strategy that all segments of society were to contribute to the country's defense. Though in the 1980s, defense policies were widely assumed to be centered around traditional armed forces, Singapore's "total defence" concept called for a broader understanding that included several pillars: a military one, an economic one, a civil one, a social one, and a psychological one. Another pillar was added more recently: a digital one.[62]

In the UAE, civilian-military relations were initially much more distant. This related to the rulers' desire, mentioned earlier, not to empower the armed forces and face a political competitor. It was also the consequence of Abu Dhabi's strategic calculus: relying on external security guarantees from Western partners meant that conscription was deemed neither viable nor necessary. However, this calculus evolved as doubts over the credibility of external security guarantees grew. Slowly then, Abu Dhabi's decision-makers eyed toward the Singaporean model.

In 2009, a General Mobilization Law was passed that allowed the government to mobilize Emirati citizens over 18 years old "in cases of direct attacks against the UAE and [...] in the case of internal unrest."[63] This was the first indication that the Emirati State was no longer considering its citizens as mere consumers of its wealth but as contributors to its security. Then in 2014, the UAE introduced a national service law that called on all citizens aged between 18 and 30 years old to serve for two years. Though the program initially excluded women, a nine-month women's voluntary program was introduced by the end of that year.[64] In a speech to the armed forces that year, Mohammed bin Zayed claimed, "I'm confident that Emiratis are ready for military service and to sacrifice anytime and anywhere [...] The youth are the hope of and the makers of the future, as no country can achieve development and progress except through the educated youth who love their country, pledge loyalty to the leadership and are ready to heed the call for duty anytime and anywhere."[65] Two years later, addressing the first cohort of the UAE national service school, the Emirati leader insisted that the "real investment is you."[66] He also stressed the importance of national service as a way to demonstrate loyalty and gratitude to the nation. Noticeably, Emirati views on civil-military relations greatly evolved throughout that process. In 2017, a report prepared by the UAE National Defense College depicted conscription as a "school for the nation: building patriotism and providing manpower for defense needs" and argued that the program "will empower young Emirati males and reinforce the nation's commitment to the country's leadership."[67] This Emirati idea of national service as a "school for the nation" was not new and has been at the heart of many initiatives designed by states in Asia, Africa, or Europe to consolidate national integration.[68] It relies on fundamental beliefs about the role of the armed forces as an agent of socialization and civic values.

Contemporary debates on national service in both countries reflect the different trajectories of those programs. In Singapore, the program has been at the center of social life for six decades, shaping defense policies and popular culture too (as demonstrated by the success of the local series of comedy movies *Ah Boys to Men* focused on national service). According to recent surveys, public support for the program remains high and was consolidated by international events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[69] A few media outlets have called for a critical discussion on the necessity for Singapore to maintain its national service, but it did not trigger a broader reaction.[70]

With regard to the Emirati experience, it is much harder to gauge the impact of its conscription program. In 2017, a report from the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies assessed positively the effectiveness of the UAE program but acknowledged the lack of data at this stage.[71] Another study, dating from 2018, looked at Emirati youths' perception of national service and estimated that most teenagers were reluctant to go through the program.[72] Although that finding is worth considering, it relied on a database built in the fall of 2014, just at the beginning of the reform.

Eventually, two different types of motivations usually lie behind the introduction of conscription programs: external necessity – the demands of a country's foreign policy, the presence of a threat at its border – and ideology – instilling a specific political culture among the citizens.[73] In both the Emirati and the Singaporean cases, national service was first used for ideological purposes – to consolidate social cohesion. However, the two states differ regarding the second motivation, external necessity: Singapore opted for conscription because it could not achieve the minimum requirements set for its military posture without mobilizing its citizens. Meanwhile, the UAE may have recently introduced its own national service program, but there is no indication – at least in the public domain – that this impacted its military posture. In other words, conscripted forces in the UAE do not yet serve an operational function.

Avoiding the Great Power Competition or Hedging Against It

As two small states shaped by a deep sense of vulnerability, the UAE and Singapore see their partnership with the US as a cornerstone of their defense policies. However, the degree to which they rely on Washington for survival evolved over time. In the 1970s, both Singapore and the UAE faced the fallouts of the UK government's decision to withdraw all its forces "east of Suez." This meant that small states in the Gulf and Southeast Asia would no longer rely on London's permanent bases to deter foreign aggression. In the following years, the US slowly – and reluctantly – replaced the UK as the external security guarantor in those regions. The history of US presence in both the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia reveals the complex and sometimes contradictory relations between Washington and its local partners.

Several aspects initially constrained Singapore-US relations. First, the Singaporean elite, particularly Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, had limited knowledge of the US. Primarily educated in the UK, Singapore's founding decision-makers viewed the US with mixed feelings. They appreciated the American economic model but worried that the Cold War framework would mean that a partnership implies a complete allegiance to Washington. Singaporean officials also believed that the US looked at the newly-independent state of Singapore suspiciously and that Washington favored a partnership then with Malaysia at the expense of Singapore.[74] Bilateral relations were also complicated by the US involvement in the Vietnam War during that period. Lee did support the US intervention.[75] He believed that Singapore needed to have "overwhelming power on its side" and the US containment of USSR influence across Southeast Asia served the interest of Singapore.[76] However, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Singapore was confronted with the fact that the US had no desire to maintain a heavy military footprint in the region.

That context shaped how Singapore eventually became a partner, yet not an ally, of the US. The SAF were to be manned with US most advanced technology, including missiles and the F-35 fighter jet.[77] They would also train with their American counterparts through multiple cooperation initiatives.[78] But Singapore was also adamant not to be perceived as a mere satellite of the US in Southeast Asia. Its government reportedly declined in 2003 the offer from the administration of George W. Bush to be named a non-NATO major ally (a status the Philippines and Thailand accepted).[79] From the Singaporean perspective, such a label would have implied a strategic alignment with the US worldview that could reduce its own agency and unnecessarily stir tensions with its Indonesian and Malaysian neighbors. Furthermore, an alliance framework with the US would have also meant that the city-state relied on US forces rather than its own to deter an aggression. This was going against the Singaporean grand strategy that, since the mid-1960s, gave centrality to the ability of its armed forces to defend its territory by themselves.

Interestingly, if this Singaporean position toward its partnership with the US remained more or less constant, the UAE's perspective on the topic changed significantly in the past two decades. US military presence stationed in the Gulf state grew in earnest in the 1990s as a result of the Kuwait invasion by Saddam Hussein's regime. As mentioned earlier, the Gulf War was a dramatic wake-up call for the GCC states. The collapse of Kuwait's military apparatus in only a few days of the invasion emphasized

how much local armed forces were ill-prepared to defend their territories. Like its neighbors, Abu Dhabi took two major decisions: to increase its defense expenditures and deepen its partnership with the US. In the following two decades, the UAE armed forces went through a process of modernization but one that was resolutely anchored in the US orbit.[80] As a result, Emirati forces were deployed in various US-led military operations such as in Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and more recently Libya and the coalition against the Islamic State. But US-UAE political relations grew more complicated in the following decade, especially during the presidency of Barack Obama. The US decision to cease its support to Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in 2011 after the former faced social mobilizations stirred anxiety in Abu Dhabi as well as in other Gulf capitals.[81] It was then followed by repeated messages from the Obama administration that the US intended to leave the region and refocus its interests on Asia.[82] This suggested that the credibility of US commitments to Gulf states was questionable. As the then UAE State Minister of Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash depicted these developments, "No outside country will any longer guarantee regional security, as Britain once did, and as the United States did until recently."[83] Since then, Emirati officials and commentators have insisted on the need to increase their self-reliance and diversify their diplomatic options.[84]

Nevertheless, like Singapore, the UAE has kept looking at the US for procurement, and American defense industries remain by far the biggest providers of Emirati armed forces. The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency estimates that from 1950 to 2022, the US implemented more than $29 billion in Foreign Military Sales for the UAE – in comparison, $12 billion for Singapore.[85] Abu Dhabi goes even further than Singapore as it relies on a firm US military commitment via a defense cooperation agreement (DCA) – the latest one came into force in 2019 for a 15-year period – that includes the deployment of US military personnel in several bases across the country (Jebel Ali, Al Dhafra, Fujairah). Although this US-UAE DCA has a broader scope than the US-Singapore military cooperation framework, it is not a mutual defense treaty that implies solidarity clause.[86] In fact, Abu Dhabi's officials publicly complained about that limitation. After Abu Dhabi suffered a series of rocket and drone attacks launched by the Houthis in Yemen in January 2022, the UAE lobbied Washington to agree on a more robust and more binding commitment.[87] In September 2023, UAE presidential adviser Anwar Gargash stated the country sought an "ironclad" defense agreement from the US.[88] Abu Dhabi's enduring desire to obtain a formal US security commitment may be one of the biggest differences vis-à-vis Singapore. It can also look like a contradiction when considered in the context of the Emirati assertions concerning its strategic autonomy. Furthermore, despite its enduring reliance on US military protection, Abu Dhabi also increasingly engages with China on defense matters, starting in the mid-2010s. The US government has repeatedly raised concerns as the intelligence community suspected Beijing of constructing a naval facility in Abu Dhabi's Khalifa Port.[89] In early 2022, following tensions surrounding the US-UAE negotiations on the sale of the F-35 jet, Abu Dhabi ordered a fleet of China's light training fighter jet L-15.[90] Furthermore, the UAE Air Force and the People's Liberation Army Air Force organized their first joint drill – codenamed Falcon Shield – in August 2023.[91] Though the SAF also maintain public relations with its Chinese counterpart, their bilateral exchanges did not involve such sensitive activities.

This reveals another major difference in the two cases under study: compared to Singapore, the UAE is more engaged in strategic cooperation with both Beijing and Washington simultaneously. At the diplomatic level, cultivating security ties with the two competing great powers suggests an obvious contradiction. In the longer term, it raises the question of the sustainability of Abu Dhabi's ambivalence toward Sino-American rivalry. At the military level, it also undermines the Emirati aspirations of strategic autonomy. Eventually, Abu Dhabi's policy toward great powers does not suggest a greater reliance on its own military capabilities but rather a diversification of its external dependencies.

Overall, why does the UAE seem more prone than Singapore to take risks vis-à-vis its external security providers, i.e., the US? There is no unique explanation for the question, and Emirati officials carefully avoid public declarations on the topic. This may be because the UAE embarked on its policy of self-reliance much more recently, and its leaders estimate that its economic wealth and its decade-long proximity with Western partners provide them with enough leeway to carve their own strategic

space. Conversely, Singapore may be more cautious in its relations with great powers because its governments have deemed the island more vulnerable to the effects of US-China competition. This relates to Singapore's geographic proximity to the main flashpoints such as the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, as well as the social fabric of the city-state as its Chinese ethnic community represents the majority of the population.

Singapore may also cultivate a darker vision of foreign relations, informed by its national history. Singaporean decision-makers, especially in their early years, were shaped by the memories of the Japanese occupation of the island during the Second World War – described by Lee Kuan Yew as "three and a half years of privation and horror."[92] This explains the enduring belief of Singaporean elites in the need to rely on the SAF to prevent, at all costs, an attack against the country. In the contemporary environment, it also allows us to understand why Singapore was one of the few Asian countries, alongside South Korea and Japan, to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and subsequently impose sanctions on Moscow.[93] The legacy of the Japanese occupation also acts as a cautionary tale for Singaporeans on its reliance upon external powers, be it the UK in the 1940s or the US today. Keeping close ties with Washington remains vital, but when push comes to shove, only national forces can be trusted to protect the island against an aggressor. Conversely, the UAE never experienced a foreign invasion like Singapore did, and the only similar experience would be the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The absence of this national trauma surely explains the contrast between the Singaporean caution and the Emirati bold, if not reckless, approach.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the Emirati and Singaporean trajectories toward strategic autonomy shed light on the similar security dilemmas faced by small states in Southeast Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. Both Singapore and the UAE have conceived their strategic environment through the lens of their desire to balance against much bigger neighbors. To do so, they relied on similar mechanisms such as a close defense partnership with the US, acting as external balancer. Despite those similarities, both states' responses have also greatly differed. Whereas Singapore's quest for self-reliance was ingrained in its national identity from the outset, Abu Dhabi moved toward that goal more recently. In Singapore, force posture and national service have been designed to prevent an invasion since the mid-1960s. In contrast, the UAE has yet to show a greater reliance on its citizens for national security missions.

But if Singapore's military model is arguably more advanced than the UAE's, the analysis also reveals common limitations: small states like Singapore and the UAE may develop local defense industries, but their tiny national markets do not allow them to reach self-sufficiency. This means that proximity with an external great power – in both cases, the US – remains vital.

Eventually, Singapore and the UAE have leeway on the balance they want to set between self-reliance and dependence on US commitments. It is in this uncertain and ever-evolving space that strategic autonomy lies. In that context, Singapore's approach has been consistent for a long time: it cultivates a close partnership with Washington and refrains from turning it into an alliance that would reduce its agency. On the other hand, Abu Dhabi has been steadily revising its view on the topic: although it still heavily depends on US patronage for its security, it is in the process of rebalancing that component through greater reliance on both local forces and new external partners – namely China. Both policies are fragile: in case of a major conflict opposing Washington to Beijing in the Taiwan Strait or in the South China Sea, Singapore may be forced to cease its ambivalent view on allying with the US; in case of increased US-China, Abu Dhabi could also have to put an end to its process of diplomatic diversification.

Overall, the research underscores the heuristic value of a comparative analysis between Singapore and Abu Dhabi to better understand the dynamics of small-state strategies in various contexts. It acutely illustrates the "vulnerability-agency paradox" of those small states. It invites us to refine the realist maxim that the "weak" must suffer "what they must," demonstrating that small states are not

necessarily destined to passively withstand external shocks without shaping their own trajectories. Nevertheless, strategic autonomy, or self-reliance, should not be viewed as a static condition; rather, it is a constant bargain that remains viable in an international system where small states can evade the pressures of alignment in the context of great power competition.

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