

Rajnath Singh's Visit to Singapore: Cementing Bilateral Defence Relations

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Summary

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's to Singapore visit from 18 to 20 November 2019 has, once again, underscored the value of the bilateral defence relationship. For Singapore, India presents a unique opportunity to advance its defence policy based on twin pillars of "deterrence" and "diplomacy". For Singaporean defence forces, a friendly power like India can help build its operational and tactical capabilities, adding to the overall deterrence vis-à-vis potential adversaries. In terms of diplomacy, both states want to avoid entanglements in any alliance relationship, reposing their faith in internal balancing. Their diplomatic posturing allows them to pursue strategic autonomy while cooperating and collaborating on shared threats and concerns.

On 20 November 2019, India and Singapore conducted the fourth edition of their annual [Defence Minister's Dialogue](#) (DMD). India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen chaired the meeting. The DMD process began after the two sides revised their 2003 Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in [November 2015](#). Under the new DCA, India and Singapore agreed to institutionalise an annual defence minister's dialogue, deepen their cooperation in maritime security and further encourage technical cooperation between their defence industries.

Though Singapore has always looked upon India as a significant player in the Indian Ocean, for most of the Cold War, New Delhi fixated upon its continental borders and ignored its maritime interests. Moreover, New Delhi and Singapore found themselves on the opposite sides of the Cold War; if Moscow was India's preferred defence partner, Singapore maintained a close relationship with Washington DC. The end of the Cold War [allowed New Delhi](#) not only to mend its relationship with the United States, but also forced it to realise its maritime potential. It was under these structural changes in international politics that the defence relationship between India and Singapore started gaining steam. Among all the Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries, Singapore was the first to begin naval exercises with India in 1993. In 1995, the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) was among the four foreign navies which participated in the first MILAN series of naval exercises among regional fleets of the Indian Ocean Region. If the 1998 memorandum of understanding on Defence Cooperation formalised this budding defence relationship, the October 2003 DCA opened the flood gates for military cooperation. Hitherto restricted to the maritime domain, the 2003 DCA created an overarching framework for military cooperation through defence policy dialogues, tri-service exercises and intelligence sharing.

However, the institutionalisation of the DMD in 2015 heralded a new phase in India-Singapore Defence Cooperation. Following the renewal of the [Air Force Bilateral Agreement](#) in January 2017, the two sides signed their inaugural [Navy Bilateral Agreement](#) (NBA) in November 2017. The NBA signalled their collective intention to foster greater cooperation in maritime security, increasing the frequency of port visits between the two navies and their willingness to sign a

mutual logistics agreement. During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Singapore in June 2018, the two sides signed the [Mutual Coordination, Logistics, and Services Support Agreement](#). In November 2018, the two navies celebrated the 25th anniversary of their joint naval exercise. SIMBEX 2018 not only saw a dramatic increase in the number of [“participating assets”](#), in terms of ships and aircraft, but also live-fire drills by the RSN in the Andaman Sea. During the third DMD, the two sides renewed the Bilateral Agreement for the Conduct of Joint Army Training and Exercises in India. The growing confidence in their mutual security relationship can be ascertained from the fact that, in 2019, the SIMBEX naval exercises were conducted in [the South China Sea](#).

The visit by the Indian Defence Minister to Singapore from 18 to 20 November 2019 has kept up with this growing momentum in Indian-Singapore defence relationship. His visit resulted in three significant agreements between the two sides.

First, what appears to be a major decision on New Delhi's part, Singapore may be allowed to use [India's Chandipore Integrated Test Range](#) for live-firing of its Spyder air-defense missiles. Part of a new Defence Technology Cooperation Agreement, which the two sides are keen to sign, the fourth DMD witnessed the two parties exchanging letters of intent for such cooperation. Located on the Wheeler Islands of India's Eastern Seaboard, the Chandipore Missile Test Range is the site where India tests all its strategic missile systems. Singapore may well become the first foreign nation to be allowed access to this secretive military complex.

Second, the two countries have agreed to formalise the [Indian-Singapore-Thailand Trilateral Naval Exercises](#) in the Bay of Bengal into an annual affair. Modi proposed the idea of such trilateral exercises in June 2018; and in October 2019, the three nations conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Andaman Sea. Making it an annual affair rather than a one-off event, as has been the case of with many such initiatives in the past, signals the resolve that India and Singapore, along with Thailand, are keen on securing the Bay of Bengal from external disturbances. The waters of the Indian Ocean and especially those of the Andaman Sea are pivotal for the security and sustainability of the Bay of Bengal's littoral countries.

Third, during the DMD, India has offered Singapore a stake in its [Defence Testing Infrastructure Scheme](#) (DTIS). Launched in July 2019 under Modi's 'Make in India' initiative, the DTIS aims to set up six to eight [“Greenfield Defence Infrastructure Facilities”](#) with the help of the private sector. The first of these facilities would be dedicated to drone platforms. In the last two decades, Indian military installations and facilities have emerged as the preferred destination for training of Singapore's armed forces and for testing its weaponry. The DTIS has the potential to fundamentally transform this user-provider relationship into more organic partnership, where the two sides can jointly develop such critical military infrastructure and learn from each other's best practices.

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