

We need to be clear-headed when offering land for Singapore to train its soldiers

Written by John Blaxland, Professor, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce has said the Australian government [has “no intention”](#) to forcibly acquire farmland north of Rockhampton in Queensland for military purposes. While this may come as a relief to landowners fighting against the acquisition, the Australian Defence Force is still in agreement with Singapore to provide land for military exercises.

The existing defence training areas in [Shoalwater Bay and near Townsville](#) were earmarked for expansion to honour the deal, under which the number of Singapore's troops on rotation in Australia will increase from 6,000 to 14,000.

This all begs the questions: why do we need to provide land to Singapore at all and what do we stand to gain from the arrangement? The answers lie in our historical relationship with Singapore and our strategic place in the region.

Australia's relationship with Singapore

Ties between Australia and Singapore go back to the days of the British Empire. Australians were based there in the second world war, fighting alongside British forces against the Japanese. Thousands were detained as prisoners of war following the British surrender to the Japanese in February 1942.

The connection between the two countries is epitomised at [Kranji War Cemetery](#) in Singapore, overlooking the Straits of Johore, where the remains of Australians who died there are interred. In the years following the war, Australia remained engaged with Singapore. Since Singaporean independence in 1965, the two have been close partners.

For Australia, Singapore has been an easy access point into South-East Asia. It is strategically located at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, through which [about half of the world's seaborne trade passes](#)

We need to be clear-headed when offering land for Singapore to train its soldiers

Written by John Blaxland, Professor, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University



[Singapore is a small city-state with virtually no spare land on which to conduct military training.](#) [New Zealand has about 64.22 square km](#) per 1,000 people, while Singapore has 0.148 square km per 1,000 people.

But why do they need our land?

Singapore is a small city-state with virtually no spare land on which to conduct military training. By way of example, [New Zealand has about 64.22 square km](#) per 1,000 people, while Singapore has 0.148 square km per 1,000 people.

The Shoalwater Bay training area encompasses 4,545 square km – more than six times the size of Singapore (719.1 square km). Acquired by the Commonwealth Government in 1965, it has been one of the most important military training areas in Australia, frequently used by Australian, US, New Zealand and Singaporean troops.

Over time, the level of use increased, with greater frequency and scale of exercises involving larger numbers of Australian troops and US marines conducting amphibious war games. This involves troops being sent ashore from nearby ships.



Singapore is a very small city-state that has long felt uneasy about its neighbourhood. [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Singapore has long felt uneasy about its neighbourhood. It is surrounded by two much larger

We need to be clear-headed when offering land for Singapore to train its soldiers

Written by John Blaxland, Professor, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University

and predominantly Muslim nations, Malaysia and Indonesia, with whom it has not always been on best terms. That unease has grown with China's increasing assertiveness and extraordinary island-building nearby in the South China Sea.

Singapore has invested in modernising and expanding its defence force. But with limited options to use for training, it [signed a A\\$2.25 billion deal](#) with Australia in 2015 to allow for an increase in troop training rotations. To accommodate this, and avoid environmental degradation, additional land has to be found.

Shoalwater Bay

The most obvious location to host Singaporean troops is alongside the existing training area in Shoalwater Bay. Singapore and Australia have already invested in military infrastructure there, and much of the money will be spent through local industries in nearby towns.

The coastal land allows for a wide variety of training activities or "war games" involving land, sea and air forces (including the amphibious activities where forces practise getting across the shoreline).

Australia has signed a deal with Singapore and has an obligation to follow through. And it is in Australia's interests to further bolster ties with a long-standing and trusted regional security partner. We should be clear-headed about the importance of ensuring this training area expansion proceeds relatively smoothly.

Singapore is paying for the benefits of accessing Australian land and a considerable budget has been allocated to secure the deal. There is little doubt, however, that the matter could have been handled better. Even if it has withdrawn plans to compulsorily acquire some land, the government needs to better argue the case for this agreement with our important regional partner.

John Blaxland does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

We need to be clear-headed when offering land for Singapore to train its soldiers

Written by John Blaxland, Professor, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University

Authors: John Blaxland, Professor, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University

Read more <http://theconversation.com/we-need-to-be-clear-headed-when-offering-land-for-singapore-to-train-its-soldiers-72490>