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SINGAPORE—CHINA RELATIONS: Building Substantive Ties amidst Challenges

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# **SINGAPORE-CHINA RELATIONS: Building Substantive Ties amidst Challenges**

Lye Liang Fook

Singapore is extremely small compared to China on a range of indicators such as geographical size, population strength, natural resource endowment and economic scale. Despite this huge asymmetry, Singapore has been able to develop a substantive relationship with China. On its part, China also sees value in engaging Singapore in a number of areas.

In fact, the two countries interact and cooperate in many fields ranging from economics, business, the arts, culture, education and the environment to military cooperation (that has progressed from bilateral land-based to naval exercises). This relationship is also manifested at many levels ranging from government-to-government ties involving the top leaders to people-to-people exchanges of tourists and students. Over the years, bilateral relations have not only deepened in existing areas but have also broadened into new areas such as financial cooperation and legal and judicial matters.

Perhaps even more notable has been the establishment of three government-to-government projects over the years which are in line with the development priorities and needs of the two countries. By working hands-on on common projects, the two countries are able to share and benefit from each other's experiences as well as best practices from around the world. Moreover, each of these projects is overseen by a high-level bilateral cooperation mechanism that ensures progress is being made on a regular basis. Such a mechanism also provides a regular platform for the leaders and officials of the two countries to interact and get to know each other better. It would be rather unusual for China to have such a mechanism with a small country like Singapore unless it saw value in the relationship.

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Going forward, there are broader factors at play that have affected and could increasingly affect the dynamics of this bilateral relationship. Foremost among them is the strategic realignment of forces between China and the United States, which small states like Singapore will have to adjust to. When China–U.S. relations are stable, there will be more room for small states to manoeuvre. However, when there is tension in China–U.S. ties, there will be greater pressure on small states to take sides. Moreover, China has certain expectations of how small countries like Singapore ought to conduct themselves, and it has made this known in no uncertain terms. On its part, Singapore, as a small country, has always stressed the sanctity of principles such as the rule of law and the resolution of disputes through legal means rather than the “might is right” approach.

### **From Turbulent Times to Better Relations**

Before diplomatic ties were established, Singapore and China stood on opposing sides of the political and ideological spectrum. In the 1950s, 1960s and even 1970s, China lent moral and material support to communist insurgency movements in Southeast Asia that threatened to overthrow the post-colonial governments in these countries. Singapore was among the Southeast Asian countries that were particularly vulnerable following its separation from Malaysia in 1965 and the intractable challenges of economic survival and nation-building.

Unlike its Southeast Asian counterparts, the Singapore government had to grapple with the additional challenges of assuaging the concerns of its Malay neighbours that Singapore would not come under China’s sway or become a “third China”, given its predominant ethnic Chinese population.<sup>1</sup> At that time many ethnic Chinese in Singapore had a strong attachment to their country of origin, i.e., the People’s Republic of China (hereafter China), and had little sense of a Singapore national identity. To foster such an identity, Singapore since independence has practised multiracialism and multilingualism so that its citizens would not think of themselves as exclusively a Chinese, an Indian or a Malay, but as a Singaporean first. Equally important, Singapore made a political decision to be the last country in ASEAN to establish diplomatic relations with China.

Despite its political and ideological differences with China, Singapore adopted a pragmatic approach and maintained economic and trade relations with China. For instance, when Malaysia’s relations with China deteriorated during the period when Singapore was a part of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 and the Bank of China branch in Singapore faced the prospect of forced closure, the Singapore government resisted pressure from the central government in Malaysia

and kept the branch open. When Singapore became independent in August 1965, the Singapore government decided that the branch would be allowed to continue operating. The Bank of China hailed this decision as beneficial to the development of friendly relations.<sup>2</sup>

Equally significant, in the 1950s and 1960s when China's trade with Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand was either seriously disrupted or banned altogether, China's trade with Singapore continued uninterrupted.<sup>3</sup> In fact, for several decades from 1950 to 1990, Sino–Singapore trade was conducted in the absence of a formal diplomatic framework.<sup>4</sup> Bilateral trade in the early 1970s hovered around S\$700 million to S\$800 million, with the balance of trade in China's favour.

Following the fallout with the Soviet Union in the late 1960s and the *détente* with America in the early 1970s, Beijing saw the need to improve its ties with the countries in Southeast Asia. Beginning in the second half of the 1970s, Beijing began to reduce its ties with the insurgency movements in Southeast Asia and ended its support for them thereafter. It established diplomatic relations with Malaysia (in May 1974), the Philippines (June 1975) and Thailand (July 1975). Although Singapore did not establish formal ties, it went on to improve relations with China. S. Rajaratnam became Singapore's first minister to visit China, in March 1975.<sup>5</sup> His visit paved the way for Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's trip to China in May 1976 where Lee met with Chairman Mao Zedong.<sup>6</sup> Although the meeting with Chairman Mao did not amount to a "substantive conversation", due to the latter's frail health, Lee was of the view that the Chinese side had extended a courtesy to the Singapore delegation through such a meeting to signal that China considered Singapore important enough.<sup>7</sup>

Another significant milestone in bilateral relations was reached when Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping made his first and only official visit to Singapore in November 1978, to reciprocate Lee's visit of 1976. During his visit, Deng held detailed and frank discussions with Lee, and the two got to know each other on a personal basis. They exchanged views on the geostrategic environment, particularly the threat posed to the world by the Soviet Union, and how China could improve its relations with the countries in Southeast Asia. Deng was also unexpectedly impressed by Singapore's socio-economic progress since its independence in 1965. Deng told Lee that he was "glad he had come and seen Singapore again after 58 years".<sup>8</sup> He remarked that Singapore had undergone a "dramatic transformation" and congratulated Lee, who replied that "Singapore was a small country with two and a half million people". In response, Deng sighed and said, "If I had only Shanghai, I too might be able to change Shanghai as quickly. But I have the whole of China!"<sup>9</sup>

At the end of his visit, after Deng had boarded the plane to depart, Lee said to his colleagues that Deng's staff were going to get a "shellacking", as Deng had witnessed a Singapore that "his brief had not prepared him for". Sure enough, after Deng's visit, articles in the *People's Daily*, the main newspaper of the Communist Party of China, took a different line and portrayed Singapore in a positive light. No longer seen simply as "running dogs of the American imperialists", Singapore was described as a "garden city worth studying for its greening, public housing and tourism".<sup>10</sup> Another indication of Deng's positive impression of Singapore was his speech in October 1979 when he mentioned how Singapore had utilized foreign capital to generate revenue for the state and income for the workers, and promoted the growth of the service sectors.<sup>11</sup> To Deng, Singapore was a vivid example of a country that had done well after independence. More importantly, Singapore's experience could provide a reference for China.

Before arriving in Singapore in November 1978, Deng had visited Thailand and Malaysia. His impression of Southeast Asia before the tour was that it was a backward region, as this was the view of many Chinese leaders of the day. But among the three countries he visited, Singapore was said to have left the deepest impression on him.<sup>12</sup> What he saw in Singapore and the frank discussions he had had with Lee had "in some way convinced Deng to open up China". Lee also told Deng that "if Singaporeans, who were descendants of illiterate, landless peasants who had to leave China, could do it, then China with its progeny of scholars, mandarins and literati who had stayed home could certainly do it".<sup>13</sup> In other words, Singapore had shown China that it was possible to achieve a high level of socio-economic development under a strong and capable leadership. More precisely, a market economy was compatible with a one-party dominant state.

Singapore left such an indelible impression on Deng that he mentioned Singapore in his 1992 *Nanxun* speech when he sought to jump-start economic reforms in China following the 1989 Tiananmen incident and the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. In his *Nanxun* speech, Deng said that "Guangdong should catch up with Asia's four dragons (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) in 20 years, not only in economics but also in social order and social climate. China should do better than these countries in these matters."<sup>14</sup> In particular, Deng mentioned that "Singapore enjoys good social order. They govern the place with discipline. We should tap their experience and learn how to manage better than them."<sup>15</sup> Deng's particular reference to Singapore opened the political window for Singapore and China to cooperate further. It sparked off "Singapore fever" in China and led to numerous visits by Chinese delegations to Singapore. In 1992 alone, more than four hundred delegations from China came to Singapore. They

wanted to better understand how Singapore had established good social order alongside rapid economic growth.<sup>16</sup>

However, it was unclear how much these visiting Chinese delegations could benefit from the Singapore experience, as they merely studied isolated aspects of the Singapore system, such as its housing, labour, the airport and industrial parks, and their stay only lasted a few days. They were thus unable to get a full picture, much less understand the underlying philosophy behind the Singapore system. To overcome this shortcoming, Lee believed that the best way to transfer Singapore's economic and public administration experience — i.e., its software — to China was to have officials from both sides work jointly on a project. Hence, the idea of the Suzhou Industrial Park was conceived for Singapore to share its experience in planning, implementing and administering an integrated new town with industrial, commercial and residential sectors.

On its part, Singapore's leaders had since the late 1980s and early 1990s actively pushed regionalization, i.e., exhorting its businesses to venture into regional markets to develop a second wing to augment Singapore's small domestic market. In a speech to cadres of the ruling People's Action Party (the ruling party in Singapore) in 1992, Lee cited the success of Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea in building economies outside their geographical boundaries. He commented that these newly industrializing economies had “two wings with which to take flight. With only one wing, Singapore will stay on the ground and not get airborne.”<sup>17</sup> The Suzhou Industrial Park provided a means for Singapore businesses to go overseas, as well as for the Singapore government to share its software experience with China.

## **A Substantive, Broad-Based Relationship**

The personal rapport and deep mutual respect that Lee and Deng struck in their initial encounter in 1978 and thereafter strengthened through subsequent encounters in the 1980s helped to lay a strong foundation for the development of Singapore–China relations.<sup>18</sup> Today, China and Singapore enjoy a multifaceted relationship with cooperation and interaction on many fronts and at several levels.

One of the important anchors is their ever-expanding and deepening trade and investment ties. As mentioned earlier, bilateral trade between the two countries hovered around S\$700 million to S\$800 million in the early 1970s. In 1990, the year diplomatic ties were established, the figure for bilateral trade was S\$5.2 billion. By 2016, bilateral trade had increased more than twentyfold to reach \$117.2

billion (see Figure 1). In 2013, China overtook Malaysia to become Singapore's largest trading partner and has retained this position ever since.

According to China's customs statistics, Singapore's trade with China in 2015 amounted to US\$79.5 billion, occupying third spot among ASEAN member states, after Malaysia at US\$97.3 billion and Vietnam at US\$95.8 billion (see Figure 2).

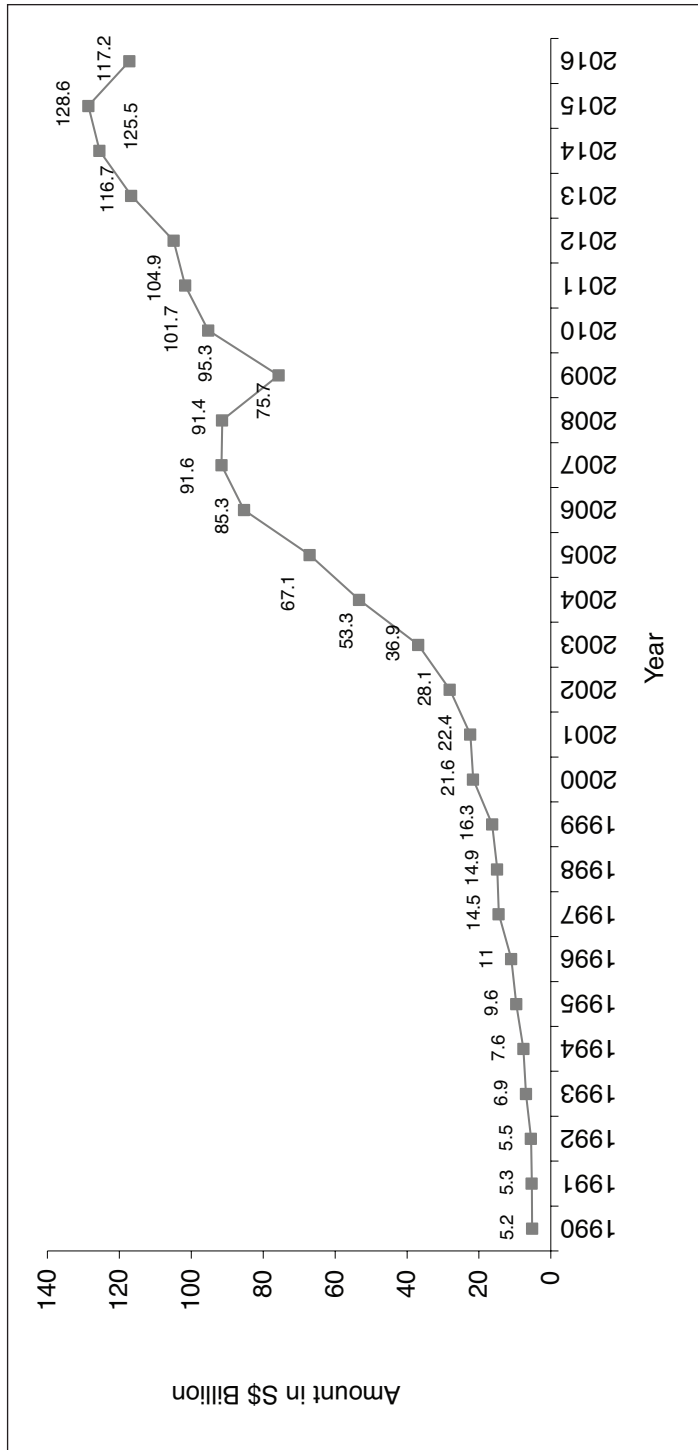
In terms of investment, China has been Singapore's top investment destination since 1997. In 2015, Singapore's cumulative investment in China was US\$121 billion, almost eight times the figure of US\$15.7 billion in 2001 when China joined the World Trade Organization. Furthermore, over the years the gap between Singapore's top investment destination of China and its second-largest investment destination of Hong Kong has widened. In 2015, the country's investment in China was US\$121 billion, more than double the figure of US\$52.7 billion for Hong Kong. Even more significant for a small country, Singapore has been China's largest investor since 2013 (see Figure 3).

With regard to tourism, the number of tourist arrivals from China to Singapore has increased over the years. Chinese tourist arrivals in Singapore crept upwards to the seventh position in 1998, third position in 2002 (overtaking Malaysia and Australia) and second position in 2003 (overtaking Japan). It remained in the second position after Indonesia for several years. In 2016, despite the downturn in bilateral relations, the number of Chinese tourist arrivals hit a record high of 2.86 million, growing 36 per cent from 2015 and almost closing the gap with tourist arrivals from Indonesia at 2.89 million (see Figure 4). Chinese tourists also ranked top in tourism receipts for the second consecutive year since 2015.<sup>19</sup> In 2017, the number of Chinese tourist arrivals to Singapore exceeded for the first time those to Indonesia.

Cultural exchanges between the two countries cover various aspects. China's dance troupes and bands have been a regular feature at the annual Chingay Parade and River Hongbao that celebrates the Lunar New Year and the cultural diversity of Singapore. In 2009, Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum collaborated with China's Palace Museum to stage a well-received local exhibition known as "The Kangxi Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City". Most recently, in June 2017, Singapore's National Heritage Board and China's Palace Museum signed a five-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) for collaboration in areas such as exhibition and loan exchange, curatorial and conservation staff exchange, collections management and conservation, and retail opportunities.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, the China Cultural Centre, that further promotes bilateral arts and cultural exchange, was officially opened during President Xi Jinping's state visit to Singapore in November 2015. Designed by local architect Liu Thai Ker,

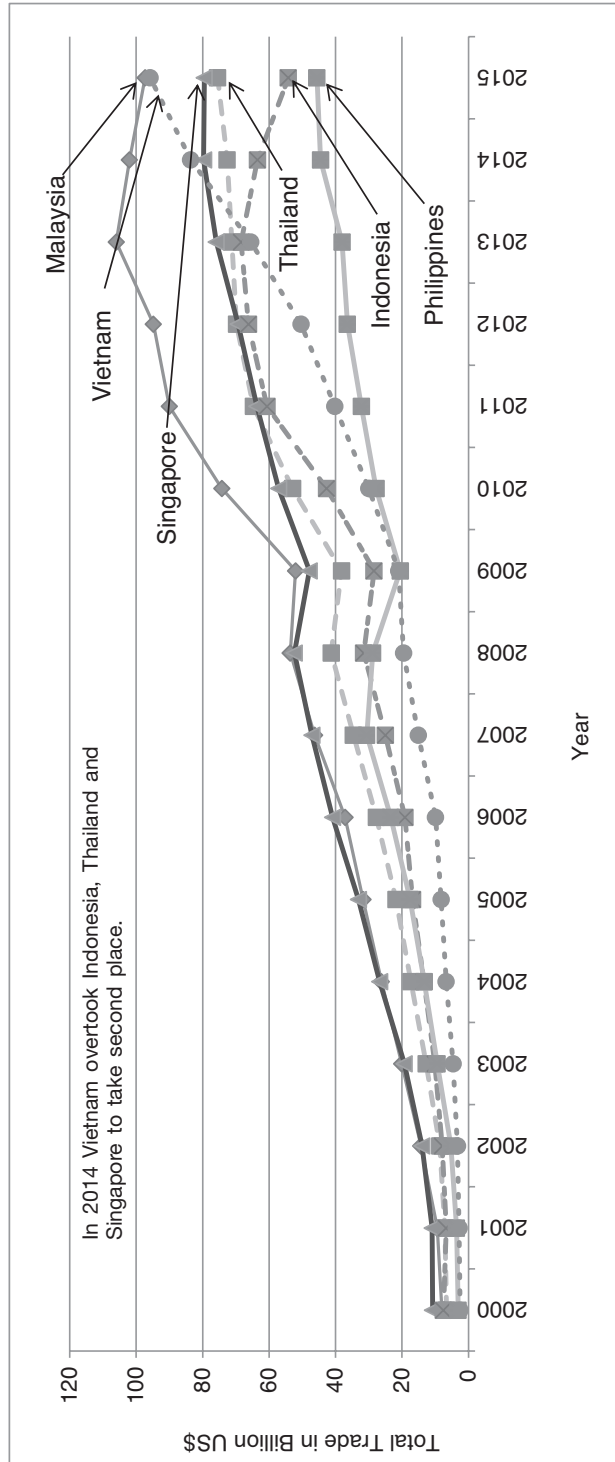
**FIGURE 1**  
Singapore–China Total Trade (1990–2016)



Source: Yearbook of Statistics, Singapore (various issues).

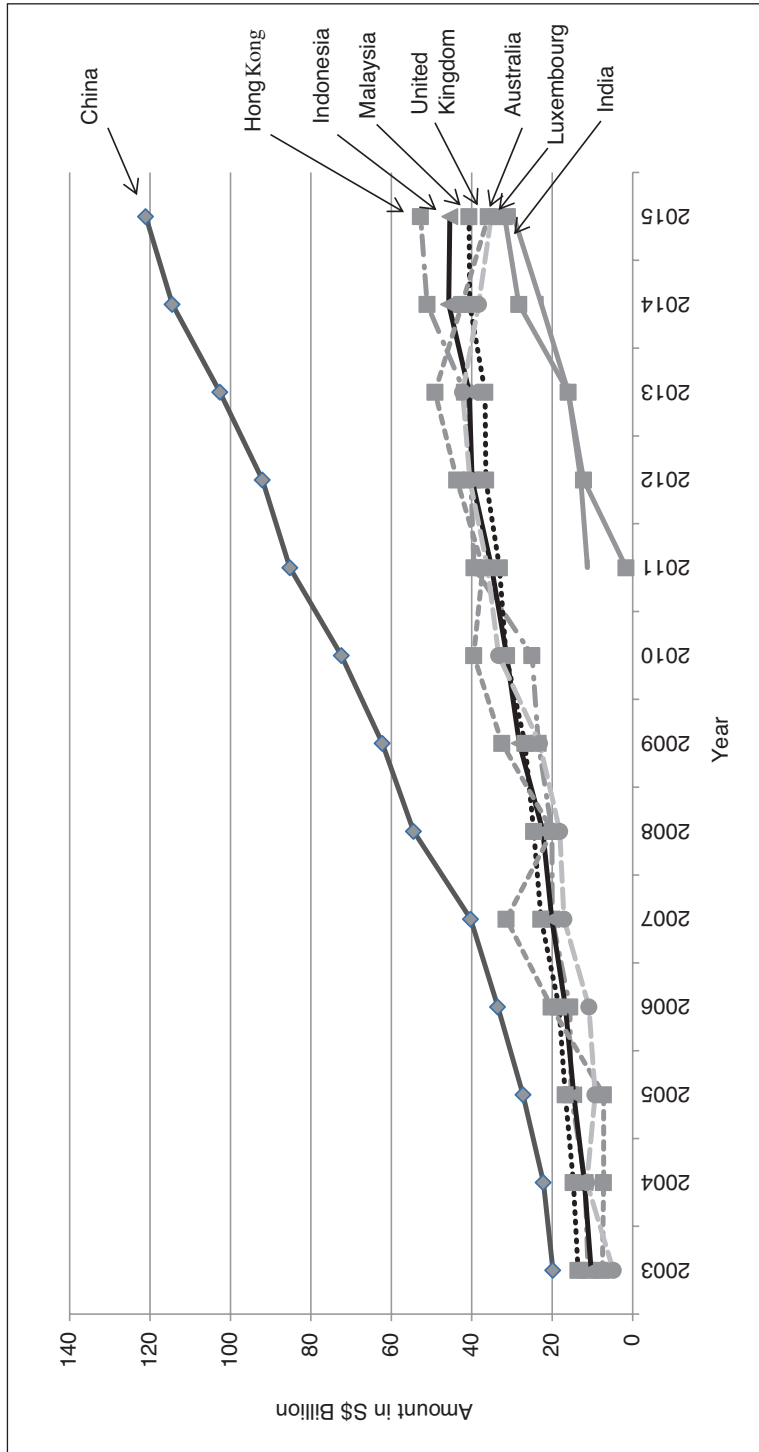


**FIGURE 2**  
**China's Trade with ASEAN-5 and Vietnam (2000–2015)**



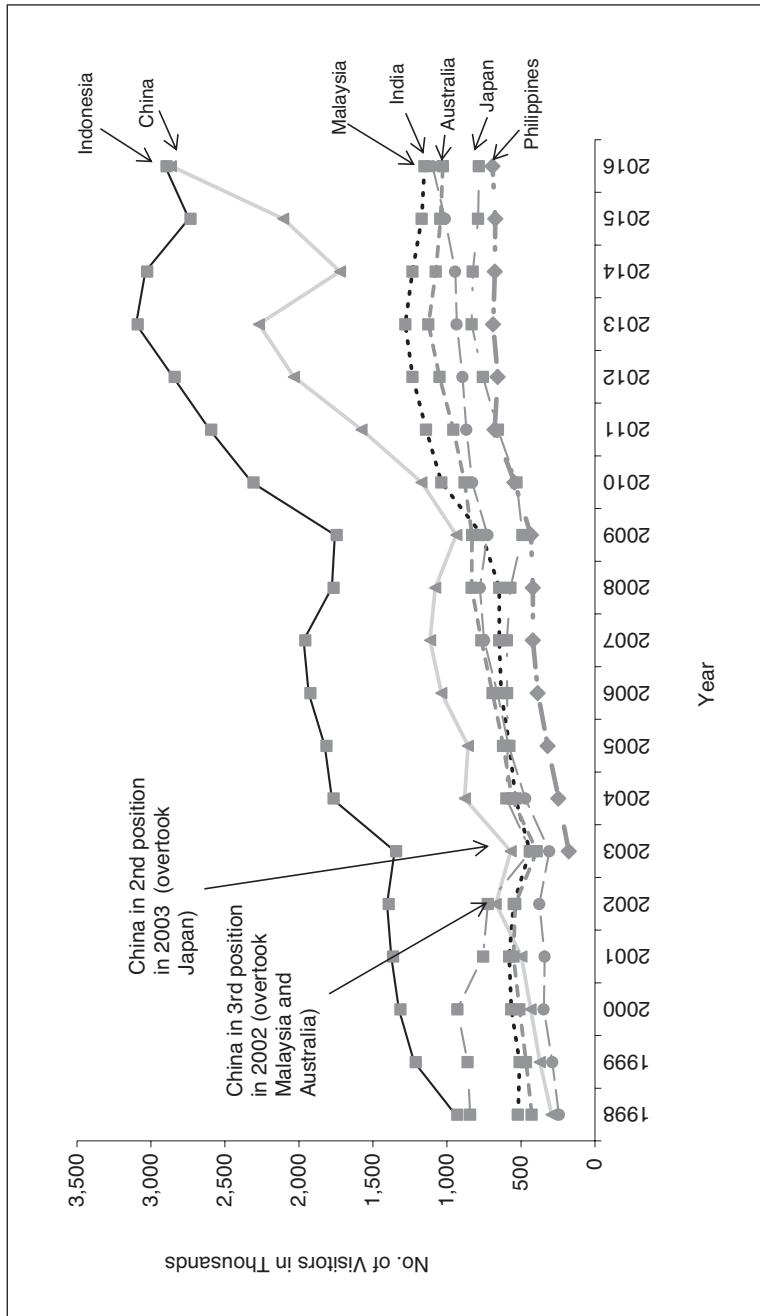
Source: China Statistical Yearbook, China (various issues).

**FIGURE 3**  
Singapore's Cumulative Direct Investment Abroad (2003-15, Top 8\*)



Note: \* Minus the Caymen and Virgin Islands.  
Source: Yearbook of Singapore Statistics (various years).

**FIGURE 4**  
**Top Seven Visitor-Generating Markets for Singapore (1998–2016)**



it is the first such centre in the world.<sup>21</sup> Cultural interactions between Singapore and China are not confined to the people-to-people level. Singapore is among a handful of countries to have received a pair of giant pandas, considered China's national treasure, in 2012. The Singapore zoological authorities are trying hard to bring the relationship between the pair of pandas to the next level by getting them to breed.

More significantly, Singapore is an early and active supporter of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It was among the first batch of countries to sign the MOU to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in Beijing in October 2014. The AIIB is a key financial platform to fund BRI projects around the world. Through its membership of the AIIB, China can leverage on Singapore's strength as a regional financial centre to raise funds for the various BRI projects. Currently, China's investments in Singapore alone amount to about one third of its total investments in BRI countries. Furthermore, Singapore's investments in China accounted for 85 per cent of total inbound investments from BRI countries.<sup>22</sup>

Among the countries along the BRI route, Singapore is somewhat different in that it is not a major recipient of BRI projects, given its already developed economy and relatively good infrastructure network. Instead, Singapore is in a good position to provide key services required by other countries, such as financing solutions (as mentioned above), legal and consulting services, and the provision of human resource training for other countries to manage BRI projects and raise the requisite capital.

In line with this thrust, the Singapore Business Federation and China Enterprises Association launched the BRI Connect Platform (an online and offline network) in August 2017 that aims to provide its members an avenue to share information on the latest developments on the BRI, provide market analysis and intelligence, conduct feasibility and evaluation studies, assist in project investment and financing, offer legal and arbitration consultation, set up online and offline BRI project-matching activities, promote the development of talent capability and showcase successful BRI stories.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the two countries have also embarked on legal and judicial cooperation in 2017 that provides avenues for businesses to resolve commercial disputes arising from the expanded economic opportunities under China's BRI. Singapore also looks forward to working with China on e-commerce and has invited China to put in a strong bid for the Kuala Lumpur High Speed Rail project.

Singapore has in fact bucked the general trend of countries hosting BRI projects from China to investing in China. The most iconic example of this is the third government-to-government project known as the Chongqing Connectivity

Initiative, where the focus is on developing businesses and networks in areas such as information and communication technology, aviation, transport and logistics, and financial services. This project, launched during President Xi's state visit to Singapore in November 2015, is positioned as "the key priority demonstration project" of China's three important development strategies; namely, the BRI, Western Region Development and Yangtze River Economic Belt.<sup>24</sup>

There are two other government-to-government projects that Singapore and China are involved in. The first is the Suzhou Industrial Park that began in 1994. Despite encountering initial difficulties, the Suzhou Industrial Park is today a leading industrial park known not only for its economic achievements but also its clean, green and liveable environment. The second project is the Tianjin Eco-city of 2008 that is geared towards creating a sustainable urban and environmentally friendly living environment. For each of these projects, a high-level joint steering council led by the deputy prime ministers of the two countries drives progress by sharing each other's experiences as well as best practices from elsewhere. At the same time, such high-level mechanisms provide a platform for the leaders of the two countries to meet regularly to promote understanding and rapport.

## Not Altogether Smooth Sailing

From time to time, Singapore–China relations have run into difficulties. These difficulties can be attributed to a number of factors, including the ongoing strategic shift in power between China and the United States, and the implications of this shift for small states like Singapore; China's rise and its expectations of how smaller states like Singapore ought to respond to its rise; and China's perception that Singapore has encroached on its interests, such as its claims to the South China Sea and the "One China" policy on Taiwan.

In recent years there has also been a growing sense of national sentiment and pride in China that has not taken lightly to perceived slights by Singapore. At times, Chinese officials would lend credence to such sentiments by asserting that the actions of a particular country have hurt the feelings of the 1.3 billion people of China, and that that particular country would have to bear all the consequences arising from this. It is not uncommon to find each of these factors or a combination of these factors at play when there is a downturn in bilateral relations.

In 2016, Singapore–China relations hit their lowest point. The key incidents are outlined here:

- In April 2016, two senior Singaporean diplomats reportedly accused China of meddling in ASEAN's internal affairs and even attempting to divide ASEAN

after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced that China had reached a four-point consensus with Brunei, Cambodia and Laos on the South China Sea issue. In response, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin asserted that China's intentions had been misunderstood and that China had sought clarification from Singapore on the accusation levelled by the diplomats.

- In June 2016, a joint foreign ministers' press conference that was supposed to involve Wang Yi and his Singapore counterpart Vivian Balakrishnan — after a special ASEAN–China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Yunnan — ended up with only a solo media appearance by the Chinese minister. The meeting was originally supposed to discuss ASEAN–China relations, the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and hold consultations on the Code of Conduct, but it was bogged down by disagreements over the South China Sea issue.
- In September 2016, a robust exchange ensued between the Singapore Ambassador in Beijing and the editor of the hawkish Communist Party publication, *Global Times*, over what was perceived to be Singapore's sole attempts (when in fact it was ASEAN's efforts) to revise the paragraphs on Southeast Asia (that contained references to the South China Sea issue) in the Non-Aligned Movement Summit's final documents.
- In November 2016, the Hong Kong's Customs and Excise Department seized nine Terrex infantry carrier vehicles belonging to the Singapore Armed Forces while they were in transit at Hong Kong's Kwai Chung Container Terminal. Capitalizing on this incident, China's foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang was reported to have said that the Chinese government is “firmly opposed to any forms of official interaction between Taiwan and countries that have diplomatic relations with us, military exchanges and cooperation included”.<sup>25</sup> In China's view, Singapore had contravened the “One China” policy by maintaining military exchanges and ties with Taiwan.

Of the four incidents above, the first three concerned the South China Sea issue while the fourth is related to Taiwan. A primary reason why the South China Sea issue loomed large in Singapore–China relations in 2016 was because this was the same year that the arbitral tribunal issued its award on the case lodged by the Philippines against China in 2013. Before, during and after the arbitral tribunal issued its award in July 2016, China was closely monitoring the responses of other countries and organizations to this award, including ASEAN member states, and took proactive steps to prevent ASEAN or its member states from lending any form of support to the award.

From the perspective of a small state, Singapore has publicly stated on various occasions the sanctity of principles for small states, such as freedom of navigation and the rule of law in the conduct of foreign relations and in resolving disputes. It has further stated its firm opposition to the “might is right” approach. Singapore’s approach stood in stark contrast to China’s preference for the South China Sea issue to be resolved away from the media glare and only involving the parties directly concerned. As a result, the Chinese government and public regarded Singapore as deliberately going against China’s interests by constantly playing up the South China Sea issue, even though Singapore was not a claimant state. In addition, they felt that Singapore was not as neutral as it had professed to be in its capacity as the coordinator of ASEAN–China relations.

Another reason why relations hit a nadir in 2016 was China’s belief that Singapore had chosen to side with America against China. Various Chinese sources have interpreted the fact of U.S. littoral combat ships and P-8A Poseidon maritime surveillance aircraft operating out of Singapore in the South China Sea as hard evidence of Singapore leaning to the side of the United States to “contain” China.

More tellingly, a *Global Times* article took issue with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s remarks at a White House state dinner in August 2016 where he commended U.S. President Barack Obama for his “leadership and decision to rebalance to Asia” which has won “America new friends and strengthened old partnerships, including with Singapore”.<sup>26</sup> The article criticized Prime Minister Lee for praising Obama’s “rebalance to Asia-Pacific” strategy and for his claim that all Southeast Asian countries welcome America engaging in such a rebalancing. The article opined that as the “rebalancing to Asia-Pacific” strategy was essentially a sword pointed at China, Prime Minister Lee had obviously taken sides by articulating these words. The article went on to assert that Singapore wanted to take possession of everything. While toying with “balancing”, it would occasionally jab China, which, at the very least, has led ordinary Chinese to feel very uncomfortable.<sup>27</sup>

This is not the first time that Singapore’s use of the word “re-balancing” or “balance” has irked China. Several years ago, in October 2009, at a dinner hosted by the U.S.–ASEAN Business Council in Washington DC, Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew reportedly told his audience that “the size of China makes it impossible for the rest of Asia, including Japan and India, to match it in weight and capacity in about 20 to 30 years. So we need America to strike a balance.”<sup>28</sup> Comments from Chinese netizens in response to MM Lee’s use of the word “balance” came fast and furious, especially after *Global Times* and other Chinese media channels gave it prominent coverage. More

specifically, the word “balance” was carried in *Global Times* and other media channels to mean that the United States should “counteract” China’s rise or the United States should be involved in Asian affairs as a “check against” China or, worse, even to “contain” China. Comments by Chinese netizens ranged from the mild, such as “Singapore trusting the US more than it trusts China”, that MM Lee had treated the Chinese as outsiders although they had treated Singaporeans as “among their own”, to the highly critical view that “Singapore is America’s Beachhead in Containing China”.<sup>29</sup>

Already in 2009 Chinese netizens had reacted strongly to MM Lee’s use of the word “balance”. At that time a different China was already emerging due to its new-found sense of confidence as it came relatively unscathed through the 2008 world economic crisis that adversely affected the United States and Europe. A key difference between then and now is that China today is far stronger and influential than it was in 2009. It has a higher expectation of how smaller states ought to behave or conduct themselves in developing relations with China. It is also more sensitive to perceived slights by other countries. Another equally important difference is that a different generation of leadership is at the helms in Singapore and China. In Singapore, a post–Lee Kuan Yew era of leaders has to grapple with a China that accords greater priority and attention to its relations with other big powers than with a small country like Singapore. China’s leaders are apparently also less receptive of what current Singapore leaders say about China, especially if such views are deemed to be critical of China. Chinese President Xi has replaced China’s low-profile orientation with a foreign policy that is more in line with that of a major power. These are the current realities that Singapore will have to contend with.

Fortunately, Singapore–China relations appear to have recovered from the unhappy episodes of 2016. In February 2017 the two countries resumed their high-level Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) Meeting, which was postponed from the year before, led by the deputy prime ministers of the two countries. The JCBC oversees the joint steering councils that drive the progress of the three government-to-government projects. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also met with President Xi Jinping in China in September 2017 and reaffirmed the strong friendship built by succeeding generations of leaders on both sides. The visit came just before China held its all-important 19th Party Congress in October 2017.

Going forward, the contours of Singapore–China relations will continue to be determined by broader factors beyond Singapore’s control, particularly the state of U.S.–China relations and the shift in relative power between the two that will



determine the room to manoeuvre for small states like Singapore, and China's increasing pressure on small states to take into account its growing interests. Singapore's response has been to reiterate its willingness to seek close and friendly ties with as many countries as possible. It continues to advocate a "consistent, honest and reliable" approach in managing its relations with other countries and has stated that if this approach sometimes gets it into a "slightly warmer soup with either China or the US, so be it". It has even said that it is prepared to take "short-term penalties" in order to maintain its long-held position as "honest brokers who say the same thing and can be relied on".<sup>30</sup>

These words may sound harsh but they underpin Singapore's foreign policy that is guided by principles, transparency and predictability. They form the very basis of Singapore's independence and sovereignty. They need not necessarily work against China's interests, as China itself has benefitted greatly from an open and rules-based world order. China has even singled out "sovereign equality" — regardless of whether a country is big or small, rich or poor — as the most important norm governing state-to-state relations and the cardinal principle observed by the United Nations and other international organizations.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, China could find much value in Singapore being a reliable, consistent and honest partner.

## Conclusion

The huge asymmetry between Singapore and China has not prevented the two countries from developing a friendly and substantive relationship in many areas and at various levels. The early generation of leaders — namely, Lee Kuan Yew and Deng Xiaoping — were instrumental in laying a firm foundation for the pragmatic development of relations which succeeding generations of leaders have continued to build upon. In addition, the small size of Singapore and its socio-economic achievements and effective governance have made it an attractive partner for China. The two countries continue to identify new areas in which to collaborate, such as in finance, in judicial and legal matters, and in e-commerce and infrastructure. The three government-to-government projects reflect how the two countries have shifted the nature of collaboration in line with their development needs. Certainly, relations between Singapore and China are bound to hit bumps from time to time. Singapore's principled approach may appear to be at odds with China's penchant to use a combination of power and other means. Yet, this difference is not strategic in nature. The two countries have continued to expand and deepen cooperation.

## Notes

1. “Kuan Yew ‘Dispels’ Third China Idea about S’pore”, *Straits Times*, 12 April 1966, p. 12.
2. “‘Thank You’ to Lee from Bank of China Chief”, *Straits Times*, 15 August 1965, p. 10.
3. Indonesia broke off diplomatic ties with China in April 1967 when President Sukarno came into power and ties were only resumed in August 1990. The Philippines suspended trade ties with China in 1949 after the People’s Republic of China was formed and established diplomatic relations with China in June 1975. Similarly, Thailand joined the Philippines (and the United States) in suspending trade ties with China during the Cold War. It only established diplomatic ties with China in July 1975. Malaysia normalized relations with China in May 1974, becoming the first ASEAN country to do so. Singapore was the last among the ASEAN countries to establish diplomatic ties with China, on 3 October 1990.
4. John Wong, “Sino–Singapore Relations: Looking Back and Looking Forward”, in *Singapore–China Commemorative Souvenir in Celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Singapore and the People’s Republic of China* (Singapore: Grenadier Press, 2000), p. 74.
5. On this trip, Minister Rajaratnam was accompanied by Lee Khoo Choy, then Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, three officials (Joseph Koh, Foreign Ministry desk officer and secretary of the delegation; Howe Yoon Chong, Port of Singapore Authority and Development Bank of Singapore Chairman; and I.F. Tang, Economic Development Board Deputy Chairman) and five Singapore newsmen. See “Raja Sees the Sights in Canton after Train Journey”, *Straits Times*, 13 March 1975 and “It All Began at a Dinner in New York...”, *Straits Times*, 14 March 1975.
6. Lee Kuan Yew could not meet Zhou Enlai during his visit in May 1976 as the latter had passed away in January 1976.
7. Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 582.
8. In 1920, Deng had transited in Singapore for two days while he was en route to France.
9. Lee, *From Third World to First*, pp. 667–68.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 668.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 668–69.
12. This view was expressed by Lü Yuanli, director of the Singapore Research Centre at Shenzhen University. See “Deng–Lee Meeting Depicted in China TV Serial”, *Straits Times*, 27 August 2014 <<http://www.straitstimes.com/news/asia/east-asia/story/deng-lee-meeting-depicted-china-tv-serial-20140827>> (accessed 1 December 2017).
13. Mr Goh Chok Tong, then Senior Minister of State for Finance, was present at the historic meeting between Lee Kuan Yew and Deng Xiaoping in Singapore in November 1978.

- See “Speech by Mr. Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, at the Singapore–Guangdong Development Forum” (in Guangzhou), Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, 24 March 2009 <<http://www.pmo.gov.sg/mediacentre/speech-mr-goh-chok-tong-senior-minister-singapore-guangdong-development-forum-24-march>> (accessed 1 December 2017).
14. Lee, *From Third World to First*, p. 714.
  15. Shenzhen Propaganda Department, ed., *Deng Xiaoping yu Shenzhen: 1992 Chun* [Deng Xiaoping and Shenzhen: Spring 1992] (Shenzhen, Haitian chubanshe, 1992), p. 9.
  16. John Wong, “China’s Fascination with the Development of Singapore”, *Asia-Pacific Review* 5, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 1998): 51–63.
  17. “SM: Singaporeans Must Now Build Up External Economy”, *Straits Times*, 16 November 1992. See also remarks by then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in “Walking with Two Legs”, *Straits Times*, 9 November 1992.
  18. Lee has described Deng as a “great statesman”, a “giant among world leaders” and who had “saved China” with his open-door policy. Lee added that “without him, China could have been like the Soviet Union. Instead, China would become a huge heavyweight nation in 30 years.” See “A Giant among World Leaders”, *Straits Times*, 21 February 1997.
  19. “Singapore Achieves Record Tourism Sector Performance in 2016”, Singapore Tourism Board Tourism media release, 14 February 2017 <<https://www.stb.gov.sg/news-and-publications/lists/newsroom/dispform.aspx?ID=696>> (accessed 1 December 2017).
  20. The MOU was signed during Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu’s visit to China in June 2017. See “The National Heritage Board, Singapore, Signs Inaugural Memorandum of Understanding with the Palace Museum, China”, Singapore’s National Heritage Board media release, 16 June 2017 <<https://www.nhb.gov.sg/~media/nhb/files/media/releases/new%20releases/media%20release%20on%20nhb-pm%20mou%20signing.pdf>> (accessed 1 December 2017).
  21. In November 2010, when Vice President Xi Jinping visited Singapore to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties, he officiated at the ground-breaking ceremony for the China Cultural Centre with Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong.
  22. “The One-Belt One-Road Initiative: Impact and Implications”, Speech by Mr K. Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs website, 28 August 2017 <<https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/Pages/Asia-Economic-Forum-on-The-One-Belt-One-Road-Initiative-Impact-and-Implications.aspx>> (accessed 1 December 2017).
  23. “SBF and China Enterprises Association jointly launched the ‘BRI Connect’ Platform at Singapore Regional Business Forum 2017”, Singapore Business Federation website <<http://www.sbf.org.sg/singapore-business-federation-and-china-enterprises-association-jointly-launched-the-bri-connect-platform-at-singapore-regional-business-forum-2017>> (accessed 1 December 2017). The Singapore Business Federation has a network

- of twenty-four thousand companies, while the China Enterprises Association has a membership of five hundred companies.
24. “Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Singapore on the Establishment of an All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times”, Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 7 November 2015 <[https://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media\\_centre/press\\_room/pr/2015/201511/press\\_20151107.html](https://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media_centre/press_room/pr/2015/201511/press_20151107.html)> (accessed 1 December 2017).
  25. “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference”, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 25 November 2016 <[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1418891.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1418891.shtml)> (accessed 4 December 2017).
  26. “Toast Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the White House State Dinner”, Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, 2 August 2016 <<http://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/toast-speech-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-white-house-state-dinner>> (accessed 4 December 2017).
  27. “Shan Renping: Zhongguo ying tiliang Xinjiapo, yeyao huachu dixian” [Shan Renping: China should understand Singapore, it should also draw its bottom-line], *Global Times*, 4 August 2016 <<http://opinion.huanqiu.com/shanrenping/2016-08/9262616.html>> (accessed 5 December 2017).
  28. “MM Calls on US to Retain Key Role in East Asia”, *Straits Times*, 29 October 2009.
  29. “Li Guangyao de yanlun baolu Xinjiapo shi Meiguo weidu Zhongguo de qiaotoubao” [Lee Kuan Yew’s remarks reveal that Singapore is America’s beachhead in containing China], *Zhonghuawang luntan*, 4 November 2009 <[http://military.china.com/zh\\_cn/critical3/27/20091104/15689477.html](http://military.china.com/zh_cn/critical3/27/20091104/15689477.html)> (accessed 10 June 2011).
  30. “S’pore Consistent in Ties with China, US: Vivian”, *Straits Times*, 14 May 2017.
  31. “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind”, Speech by President Xi Jinping, Xinhuanet, 19 January 2017 <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/19/c\\_135994707.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/19/c_135994707.htm)> (accessed 5 December 2017).

