



## The Characteristics and Impacts of Singapore-U.S. Relations Under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

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### Abstract

The relationship between Singapore and the United States under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is marked by equality and mutual benefits, despite the imbalance of power between the small nation and the superpower. This study aims to explore the pragmatism of Singapore's foreign policy and how it has shaped bilateral relations, leading to substantial advantages for both parties. Using a combined research approach, including the analysis of diplomatic records, policy documents, and historical data, this study examines the political, economic, and security impacts of Singapore-U.S. relations. The theoretical framework is based on small-state foreign policy theory and international relations, focusing on the strategic roles smaller countries play when engaging with larger powers. Findings reveal that Singapore's ties with the U.S. have significantly enhanced its position in Southeast Asia, strengthened economic and security interests, and improved cooperation with ASEAN in the context of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies. The analysis argues that Singapore's flexible foreign policy has allowed it to leverage its partnership with the U.S. to maximize national benefits and influence broader ASEAN-U.S. relations in meaningful ways.

**Keywords:** Singapore, United States, Characteristics, Foreign Policy, Lee Hsien Loong

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## Introduction

Since its independence in 1965, and especially after the end of the Cold War, Singapore has proactively pursued a comprehensive strategy to ensure national security and stability, protect sovereignty, and safeguard its national interests. Singaporean policymakers have keenly understood the challenges posed to a small state without inland waterways in ensuring national security. Within the context of Southeast Asia, where great powers often seek expansion and engage in competition, Singapore recognized the utility of leveraging the conflicts among major powers to maintain a balance of power. Singapore's approach extends beyond merely minimizing the influence of great powers in the region; it actively fosters comprehensive cooperation with these powers across political, economic, and security domains. This strategy aims not only to sustain good relations but also to deter any excessive expansionism, thereby achieving a balanced regional power structure. By skillfully managing its international relations, Singapore has succeeded in creating a secure and stable environment that protects its national interests and contributes to sustainable national development. By judiciously utilizing its geostrategic advantages, Singapore has forged diplomatic relations with numerous nations, including the U.S., a key partner. A critical factor in Singapore's success is its ability to leverage America's geopolitical and economic ambitions in Southeast Asia. This approach enables Singapore to effectively "borrow" political and military strength from this superpower. Singapore is not merely a small country; it occupies a strategic position in the U.S.'s global vision. The nation has adeptly established close ties with Washington through defense cooperation agreements, trade pacts, and investment frameworks. Through these measures, Singapore has accessed U.S. resources and cutting-edge technology to bolster economic growth and enhance defense capabilities.

Despite these developments, systematic research into Singapore's diplomatic strategies, particularly in its relationship with the U.S., is still limited in Vietnam. A deeper exploration of Singapore's foreign policy could offer valuable lessons for Vietnam in building relationships with other major powers while maintaining regional stability and security. The Singapore-U.S. interaction also presents a model for other small nations to craft their diplomatic strategies amid escalating geopolitical competition. The U.S., as a global superpower, is currently executing a new strategy to sustain its presence and influence in Southeast Asia. To achieve this, it requires strategic partners like Singapore, which Washington highly values for its geographical importance. Singapore, located near the Malacca Strait—one of the world's most significant maritime trade routes—is strategically vital.

The Malacca Strait plays a crucial role in global security, not only for Southeast Asia but also for international trade and the transportation of oil. Effective control or favorable access to this strait benefits not only the U.S. but also its regional allies. Ensuring stability and security in the Malacca Strait directly impacts global supply chains and access to vital resources. Consequently, building a strong relationship with Singapore ensures the U.S. holds a strategic chokepoint amid the current geopolitical landscape.

A robust relationship with Singapore helps the U.S. maintain its regional influence while creating a powerful network of partnerships, promoting mutual security and economic growth. Singapore, leveraging its strategic location, has emerged as an essential bridge between major

powers, reaffirming its role in preserving peace and stability in Southeast Asia and on the global stage.

### Literature Review

The relationship between Singapore's foreign policy, regional economic dynamics, and security cooperation with global powers, notably the United States and China, is underpinned by a complex interplay of historical, geopolitical, and economic factors. This literature review synthesizes key sources addressing these themes, categorizing them by focus areas to identify trends, gaps, and opportunities for further research. Singapore's pragmatic and multilateral foreign policy has been a cornerstone of its diplomatic strategy since its independence. Nathan (2008) underscores the evolutionary trajectory of Singapore's foreign policy, tracing its origins and adaptability in response to geopolitical shifts. Nguyen and Le (2015) highlight Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's emphasis on balancing international relations, aligning national interests with global norms. Similarly, Jamrisko, Koutsoukis, and Olorunnipa (2018) reflect on Singapore's concerns regarding ASEAN's potential need to choose between the U.S. and China, mirroring broader regional apprehensions. The study stated that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed concerns about the escalating tensions between the United States and China. He emphasized that Southeast Asian nations, including Singapore, might face increasing pressure to align with one of the two superpowers, which could challenge the region's unity and stability. Lee highlighted the importance of ASEAN's centrality and the need for member states to remain cohesive to navigate the complexities of U.S.-China relations effectively. He also underscored the significance of maintaining open and inclusive regional frameworks to manage the strategic competition between the U.S. and China.

Adelman (2012) identifies the deepening U.S.-Singapore strategic partnership, marking significant advancements in bilateral security relations. This is further exemplified by the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs' (2023) comprehensive account of security cooperation, emphasizing the mutual benefits derived from military collaborations. MINDEF Singapore (2009) elaborates on Singapore's integration into global defense systems, exemplified by initiatives like the RSAF F-15SG Fighter Detachment in the U.S. In the joint press conference held on March 29, 2022, President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore discussed the growing bilateral relationship between the United States and Singapore, emphasizing cooperation in various areas, including trade, technology, security, and regional stability. Prime Minister Lee reaffirmed Singapore's commitment to its partnership with the U.S. and highlighted the importance of ASEAN's role in fostering peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region. President Biden acknowledged Singapore's contributions to global security, climate change efforts, and the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement. The leaders also discussed the evolving strategic landscape, the need for continued cooperation in counterterrorism, and the shared goal of ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Singapore's nuanced stance on the South China Sea disputes highlights its unwavering commitment to international law and the maintenance of regional stability, while simultaneously seeking to avoid being drawn into overt alignments with any superpower. Its diplomatic approach seeks a careful balance, avoiding antagonism with China while pushing for a clear and consistent adherence to international norms. As noted by VietNamNet (2011), Singapore has consistently

advocated for the peaceful resolution of disputes and the need for all parties to respect international legal frameworks, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This reflects broader regional concerns about China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, where tensions over territorial claims have escalated in recent years.

In addition to this, Hunt (2016) provides further context to the diplomatic dynamics surrounding the South China Sea, discussing China's geopolitical signaling, particularly through incidents involving Singapore. These incidents, though not always direct confrontations, reveal China's broader strategy of projecting influence and testing the limits of regional response to its expanding territorial claims. Singapore's response, characterized by calls for adherence to legal norms and multilateralism, illustrates its delicate navigation between safeguarding its national interests and maintaining its strong bilateral ties with China. Singapore's role within ASEAN is also pivotal to understanding its broader foreign policy strategy. As highlighted by Zhang and Wu (2013), Singapore has been instrumental in strengthening the ASEAN framework and deepening engagement with China through multilateral platforms. Singapore recognizes the importance of ASEAN's unity and seeks to position itself as a key mediator in the organization, leveraging ASEAN's collective voice to engage with China in a way that ensures regional peace and stability. This approach reflects Singapore's broader foreign policy objective of promoting multilateralism and inclusivity, which is also emphasized in the ASEAN-U.S. Joint Statement (2009). The statement outlines the importance of maintaining enduring peace and prosperity in the region through multilateral agreements and partnerships, something that Singapore has consistently championed throughout its diplomatic history.

Despite the extensive documentation of Singapore's foreign and security policies, there are significant gaps that require further exploration. One notable area is the analysis of how emerging global trends, such as rapid technological disruptions and environmental challenges, may shape Singapore's future strategies. As a small nation, Singapore is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and the rapid pace of technological change, which may have profound implications for its economic and geopolitical strategies. Understanding how Singapore adapts to these challenges, particularly in the context of its ongoing engagement with both ASEAN and global powers like the U.S. and China, remains underexplored. Additionally, there is a need for deeper insight into domestic public opinion regarding Singapore's foreign policy priorities. While official government statements provide a clear picture of policy direction, understanding the public's perceptions and concerns would offer a more nuanced perspective on how domestic factors influence decision-making. This could include exploring how Singapore's multi-ethnic population views its foreign relations, particularly with neighboring countries, as well as its role in global geopolitics. These insights could enrich the understanding of the policymaking process and provide a more holistic view of Singapore's foreign policy landscape.

The reviewed literature establishes Singapore as a pivotal player in regional and global geopolitics, navigating complex economic and security dynamics with strategic foresight. Future research could explore the implications of an increasingly multipolar world for Singapore's diplomacy and economic positioning. This body of work provides a robust foundation for examining Singapore's role in shaping Southeast Asia's future trajectories.

## Methods

This study employs a synthesis-based research approach to explore the characteristics and impacts of Singapore-U.S. relations under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The synthesis method integrates data from various sources, including government reports, academic studies, policy papers, and expert analyses, to construct a comprehensive understanding of the subject. Key data was collected and organized to examine historical contexts, notable features of Singapore's pragmatic foreign policy, and the bilateral and regional consequences of its relations with the U.S. Through this synthesis, the study identifies recurring themes and patterns, offering insights into the strategies Singapore employs to balance its relations with major powers while safeguarding its national interests. By synthesizing diverse perspectives, this research seeks to deliver a consolidated and in-depth analysis, with practical implications for understanding Singapore's diplomatic strategies and their broader regional significance.

## Results and Discussion

### **The relationship between Singapore and the United States is one of a small country and a large country, but it is equal and mutually beneficial**

The relationship between Singapore and the U.S. can be described as the relationship between a small country, or more precisely, an extremely small country, and the world's sole superpower. Commenting on this relationship, Singaporean researcher See Seng Tan wrote: "In many ways, the United States and Singapore form an odd couple. One side is the world's leading economic and military power and a model of liberal democracy, while the other is a small country with a non-liberal political tradition..." (See Seng Tan, 2016). On the surface, the Singapore-U.S. relationship seems asymmetrical, much like the relationship between other small Southeast Asian countries and the U.S. However, in practice, this is an equal and mutually beneficial relationship. The U.S. and Singapore are not only security partners but also significant economic partners for each other. Throughout their history, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the U.S. has never imposed its will on Singapore nor pressured the Singaporean government as it has done with Thailand during the military coup or with the Philippines during President R. Duterte's anti-drug campaign in 2016-2017. On the contrary, Singapore's Prime Minister has criticized U.S. policies toward Southeast Asia and bluntly commented on the declining political and economic power of the U.S., both globally and specifically in Southeast Asia.

In its policy toward the U.S., Singapore has always maintained its independence and autonomy, neither aligning fully with the U.S. nor leaning toward the U.S. in the U.S.-China competition, even though the U.S. desires for this island nation to firmly side with them. The benefits in the relationship between the two countries are generally balanced. Singapore receives U.S. support in efforts to maintain its territorial sovereignty and national security. In turn, the U.S. benefits from a favorable location to maintain its political and security presence in Southeast Asia. In trade relations, the U.S. enjoys a trade surplus, while Singapore benefits from multinational companies of the U.S. operating on its territory. These realities in the relationship between Singapore and the U.S. in recent years raise the question: Why can a small country like Singapore have an equal relationship with the U.S.? This phenomenon can be explained with the following arguments:

First, in order to maintain an equal relationship with the U.S. and other major powers, and to protect its national interests, Singapore has made efforts to increase its power, both tangible and intangible. Regarding tangible power, Singapore has worked to develop its economy, becoming the most developed economy in Southeast Asia and standing among the most developed economies in the world. Its military and defense capabilities have strengthened with modern weapons. While Singapore's military is small in number, its soldiers are trained in military powers, particularly in the U.S. and Taiwan. In terms of intangible power, Singapore is one of the most important members of ASEAN, not only because it is one of the five founding members of ASEAN but also because of its significant contributions to ASEAN's current regional economic integration process. The initiative to establish the ASEAN Economic Community, one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community, was proposed by Singapore. Singapore also contributes greatly to ASEAN integration initiatives. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) forum was established based on the idea of summoning an ASEAN-Europe summit by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. While not claiming territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea, Singapore firmly opposes China's expansionist actions in the region and publicly supports the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling against China's "nine-dash line" claim. This stance has been supported not only by Southeast Asian countries in dispute with China in the South China Sea but also by other major countries, including the U.S. Singapore's position and prestige within ASEAN add intangible strength to its tangible power. Singapore's membership in international cooperation organizations like the UN, APEC, ASEAN +3, and EAS has also helped enhance its intangible power. Singapore's active participation in regional and international cooperation organizations, as well as its establishment of other international groups it leads, further increases its global importance. At the United Nations, Singapore established the Forum of Small States (FOSS), a non-official group of 105 countries, all with populations under 10 million. These countries meet to discuss issues, form common positions, and share experiences. Additionally, Singapore created the Global Governance Group (3G), an unofficial alliance of 30 small and medium-sized countries that exchanges views on global governance such as financial rules, IMF and World Bank policies, and economic policies. These forums represent ways Singapore aligns itself with other small states, thereby increasing its importance in the international community. This importance acts as an intangible resource that enhances Singapore's power, allowing Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his government to act "... beyond your weight," as U.S. President Joe Biden highlighted in a joint press conference with Lee in Washington on March 29, 2022 (The White House, March 29, 2022).

Second, Singapore uses the "China card" to increase its power relative to the U.S. Singapore knows that the U.S. needs its support in the strategy of containing China. But instead of siding fully with the U.S., Singapore has fostered comprehensive cooperation with the rising power. However, Singapore maintains a certain distance in its relations with China, ensuring the U.S. understands that Singapore is not leaning toward Beijing. This management of relations with China has meant the U.S. cannot be hostile toward Singapore and must give concessions to this tiny island state, fearing that Singapore might integrate into China's world, where Beijing would play a leading role. Prime Minister Lee and other Singaporean leaders are well aware of the U.S.'s concerns, which is why they are not afraid to pursue a policy of cooperation with China that sometimes goes against U.S. interests in containing China. Despite discontent, the U.S. cannot alter Singapore's policy of cooperation with China.

Lastly, in its relationship with the U.S., Singapore does not seek Official Development Assistance (ODA) like other developing countries. Although Singapore's total economic strength is smaller than that of the U.S., its per capita GDP is on par with the U.S.'s. The country's abundant internal resources allow it to fund its own socioeconomic development projects without needing external assistance, including from the U.S. Therefore, the U.S. cannot leverage human rights issues to pressure Singapore into compliance, as it has done with other developing countries.

### **The relationship between Singapore and the United States, based on pragmatic foreign policy**

Pragmatism is one of the foundational principles guiding Singapore's foreign policy since its founding and continues to do so today. The former President of Singapore, S. R. Nathan, emphasized this by stating, "Pragmatism is not about rejecting idealism or pursuing idealistic goals, but rather a necessary condition in international relations, especially for small countries like ours. We must focus our limited resources and strength on critical areas. Our goal is clear - to ensure the independence, survival, and development of Singapore. These are our core national interests that we strive to promote" (Speech by Mr. S. R. Nathan, 2008).

With this perspective, Singapore's foreign policy, particularly its approach to the United States, has been carefully considered, based on the country's realities and the challenges it faces in safeguarding national interests. For Singapore, securing its independence and survival is its primary national interest, which may be threatened by neighboring countries, particularly Malaysia, which considers Singapore as a lost territory, and by the rise of China (Ministry of foreign affairs Singapore, 2009) The threat from China does not involve direct military aggression in the short and medium term, but rather concerns activities threatening maritime security in the South China Sea, where Singapore has vital economic interests. To protect its independence, territorial integrity, and economic security, Singapore cannot rely solely on its own strength; it needs support from a global power, which could only be the United States, a country with strategic, economic, and maritime interests in the South China Sea. Singapore also requires U.S. cooperation in economic development, particularly in transitioning towards a knowledge-based economy. With these considerations, Singapore prioritizes cooperation with the U.S. in security, defense, trade, and investment. The United States also acknowledges Singapore's pragmatic approach, particularly in security matters. As such, "The U.S. Department of State accused Singapore of taking a selective and transactional approach in its counterterrorism cooperation" (U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2012"). However, due to larger interests in the relationship with the island nation, the U.S. did not respond negatively. As a result, security and economic cooperation have been the most prominent and effective aspects of the Singapore-U.S. relationship during Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's tenure.

On the U.S. side, Washington also applies a pragmatic approach in its relations with Singapore, needing Singapore in two key areas: First, the strategic and economic location of Singapore. Speaking about Singapore's importance to the U.S., U.S. Ambassador to Singapore David Adelman wrote, "Situated almost equidistant between Beijing and New Delhi, between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, in a region that many view as a global economic growth engine for the next half-century, Singapore will be crucial for no reason other than the fortune of its strategic position. For the U.S., this island has long held a key position in our policy toward Southeast Asia,

despite its small size (5.2 million people and an area slightly larger than Washington, D.C.)" (Adelman, 2012, p. 11-14). With its location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the U.S. can utilize Singapore's strategic position to control the trade route through the Malacca Strait, one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. By controlling this route, the U.S. not only hampers China's external trade growth but also makes it more difficult for Chinese oil tankers to import oil from the Middle East and Africa. The U.S. political and military presence in Singapore facilitates connections with their massive military base in Guam, enabling swift support for allies in Oceania, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia. Additionally, Singapore's economic significance is vital to the U.S. While Singapore's domestic market may be small, the economic influence stemming from Singapore is vast. Many U.S. companies make decisions affecting the region from offices in Singapore, impacting industries ranging from banking to mining. Singapore's role as a key transshipment port in the Indian and Pacific Oceans further enhances its value to the U.S., helping smooth economic transactions within the region.

Second, Singapore plays an essential role within ASEAN. As one of the five founding members of ASEAN, Singapore is central to the association. Beyond its significant contributions to ASEAN's internal development, Singapore is crucial in ASEAN's international relationships. The country maintains strong ties with both major powers, the U.S. and China. These positive relations are beneficial to the U.S., particularly when it faces challenges with ASEAN, such as during the Trump administration (2016-2020). Singapore's international initiatives within ASEAN, such as IAI and AEC, have been realized. Furthermore, Singapore has a forward-looking vision, exemplified by its role in initiating the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 1994 and in the establishment of the Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia's leading security forum. Singapore's standout capabilities in international relations and its central role in ASEAN draw U.S. attention, especially amid U.S.-China competition. U.S. support from Singapore increases the likelihood of successful initiatives with ASEAN, gaining the U.S. greater influence in Southeast Asia compared to China. Ultimately, the U.S.-China rivalry in Southeast Asia is a competition for influence over ASEAN.

In pursuit of these objectives, the U.S. has adopted a pragmatic approach to cooperating with Singapore, emphasizing security and economic collaboration, while securing Singapore's support in ASEAN relations. Thus, the U.S. makes only passing references to human rights issues that they consider violations in Singapore.

Both Singapore and the U.S. employ a pragmatic approach in their relationship, focusing on boosting security and economic cooperation. This pragmatic collaboration has made these two areas the most prominent aspects of their relationship under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's leadership.

### **The Impact of Singapore-U.S. Relations during the tenure of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong**

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the relationship between Singapore and the United States has become more dynamic and profound compared to previous periods. This relationship has had a strong impact on both parties as well as on several international relationships in Southeast Asia, particularly ASEAN-U.S. relations.



### **A. The Benefits of Relations with the U.S. for Singapore**

The security and defense cooperation with the United States has allowed Singapore to acquire defense equipment and technology, providing them with a military advantage over Malaysia and Indonesia in case of deteriorating relations. It also complicates the security calculations of the two countries by creating the possibility that the U.S. could protect Singapore, if not militarily, at least politically. This alleviates Singapore's sense of insecurity when neighboring larger countries with whom they have less amicable relations exist. The U.S. tough stance on the South China Sea, particularly since President B. Obama took office, has made Singapore feel more assured about maritime security in the South China Sea.

Moreover, through its defense relations with the U.S., Singapore has the privilege of participating in the Joint Striker Fighter (JSF) Program led by the U.S. It is also one of the closest partners of the U.S. in terms of defense technology transfers. To date, Singapore is the only Southeast Asian country to have received American fighter aircraft (F-16, F-15) and missile launchers. Furthermore, Singapore's military personnel have had more training in the U.S. than any other country in the region (Adelman, 2012, p. 11-14). The country not only participates in bilateral exercises with the U.S., but it also has the opportunity to join various multilateral exercises led by the U.S. These exercises have helped the Singaporean military enhance its capabilities and combat experience in case the nation faces an attack from outside.

In the economic sphere, Singapore has also received numerous privileges from the U.S. It is the only Asian country with which the U.S. signed a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The economic cooperation results between the two nations in recent years demonstrate the impact of the FTA on the development of trade and investment relations between the two countries.

In other areas of cooperation, Singapore has reaped several benefits from the U.S. The two countries are working closely on addressing climate change, cybersecurity, green development, and many other collaborative efforts.

Another significant benefit for Singapore is the U.S.-Singapore Third Country Training Program (TCTP). The purpose of this program is to provide technical support and training for ASEAN member countries and Timor-Leste. TCTP focuses on connectivity, sustainable development, and resilience in the region. Since its inception in 2012, Singapore and the U.S. have organized 65 courses and trained over 1,300 government officials from ASEAN member countries, Timor-Leste, and the ASEAN Secretariat in fields such as trade, intellectual property, environment, healthcare, urban planning, disaster management, and cybersecurity, among other areas ( US Embassy Singapore, 2012, p.1). This program has helped Singapore increase its influence in Asia, and especially in ASEAN.

Relations with the U.S. Help Singapore Improve its Position in Relations with China  
Singapore-China relations were established in 1990. Overall, relations between the two sides have developed fairly smoothly due to many shared benefits in economic cooperation, ethnic closeness (as 70% of Singapore's population is of Chinese origin), and cultural similarities. However, there are also fundamental conflicts over interests, especially regarding Taiwan and maritime security in the South China Sea.

Regarding Taiwan, after establishing official diplomatic relations with China, Singapore severed its diplomatic ties with Taiwan and pledged to adhere to the "One China" policy. Singapore maintains only economic, cultural, and social relations with Taiwan. However, such relations still

do not sit well with Beijing. What China desires is for Singapore to completely cut ties with Taipei and isolate Taiwan to shrink its international space. Singapore has not accepted China's demand, as doing so would harm Singapore's interests in relations with Taipei. Not only has Singapore continued traditional economic cooperation with Taipei, but it also continues to allow Taiwan to host military training despite China's invitation for Singapore to bring its military to Hainan instead of Taiwan. As a result, Singapore has become one of the countries most frequently warned by China, particularly during the period when Taiwan implemented its "Southbound Policy" under President Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian. One example is on August 5, 2010, when the Taipei Representative Office in Singapore and the Singapore Trade Office in Taipei announced that they would "explore the feasibility of a bilateral economic cooperation agreement equivalent to a Free Trade Agreement." This idea was immediately harshly criticized by Beijing, which stated, "We believe Singapore will adhere to the One China policy and manage its trade and economic relations with Taiwan appropriately" (Choiruzzad, 2017, pp. 1-15). In November 2016, Hong Kong customs detained nine Singaporean Terrex infantry carrier vehicles on their way from Taiwan to Singapore, citing violations by APL Shipping Company. China used this opportunity to remind Singapore to "stick to the One China principle" (Katie Hunt, 2016).

On the South China Sea issue, China and Singapore have differing interests. China wants to monopolize the South China Sea both to expand its territory and to control international shipping routes through these waters. Although Singapore is not involved in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, it has vital interests in maritime security there. Therefore, in response to China's actions that threaten maritime security, Singapore has consistently voiced its opposition. At the 21st Annual Meeting of the Parties to the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (SPLOS 21) from June 13-17, at the U.N. headquarters in New York, Singapore, along with other Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Laos), called for a peaceful solution and the use of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea to resolve disputes in the South China Sea (VietNamNet News).

Singapore's firm stance on the South China Sea has angered China. However, Beijing quickly sought to repair relations with Singapore. After becoming Premier of China, in August 2013, Li Keqiang invited Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to visit China. During the meeting, Premier Li Keqiang expressed his hope that Singapore could play a constructive role in maintaining peace and stability in the region. He also defended China's previous activities in Southeast Asia, stating that China has always called for negotiations with the parties involved in the dispute; any actions that complicate and escalate the situation are "undesirable." On this occasion, the Chinese Premier urged both countries to repair the political foundation for bilateral relations to ensure healthy development. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to Beijing helped to somewhat ease political tensions between the two sides.

The reason China has to make concessions to Singapore is because "Singapore has diplomatic weight in China due to its political, economic, and strategic influence," as noted by Zhang Daqiang, an expert on Southeast Asia at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Zhang Yunbi and Wu Jiao, 2013). Another reason is Singapore's relationship with the U.S., especially in terms of security and defense. If China does not adjust its relations with Singapore, the city-state might lean towards the U.S. and cooperate with Washington in the strategy of counterbalancing China. This would put China in an unfavorable position from various angles.

Singapore's leadership clearly understands the value of their country to China. They also know that what China fears most is not Singapore's strength, but the Singapore-U.S. relationship. Therefore, Singapore has utilized its ties with the U.S. as a political security tool to elevate its position in relations with China. Shortly after the Permanent Court issued its ruling on the Philippines' suit against China's Nine-Dash Line claims in the South China Sea, Singapore publicly supported the ruling. China was furious but was unable to act as it did with the Philippines. It even chose Singapore as the location to meet with Taiwan's leaders.

### **B. The Impact on the U.S. Relations with Singapore have brought numerous benefits to the U.S**

Firstly, since 1991, the U.S. has gained an ideal location for continuing its military presence in Southeast Asia, after the Philippines decided to end the stay of U.S. forces at Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. This privilege was obtained through an agreement signed by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle in 1990 (also known as the 1990 MOU). This agreement facilitates the U.S. military's access to Singapore's air and naval bases, as well as logistical support for their personnel, aircraft, and vessels in transit. As part of this agreement, the U.S. has routinely deployed fighter jets for exercises, refueling, and maintenance, and has stationed coastal combat ships and P-8 Poseidon aircraft in Singapore starting in 2013 and 2015. To ensure continued security presence in Southeast Asia, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and U.S. President Donald Trump signed an amendment to the 1990 MOU in September 2019 ("2019 AMOU") that extends U.S. access to Singaporean facilities for another 15 years (MINDEF Singapore, 24 Sep 2019). Regarding the significance of renewing the 1990 MOU, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed, "Access rights and overflight privileges provided by Singapore have advanced U.S. government efforts to strengthen a Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (Fact Sheet: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2023). This can be considered the most significant benefit the U.S. gains from its relationship with Singapore.

The second benefit is Singapore's participation in several U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts. After the 9/11 attacks, Singapore joined the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and Afghanistan. The country also played a key role in U.S. anti-piracy efforts. Singapore commanded the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151) in the Gulf of Aden more than five times between 2009 and 2021. It was also the first Southeast Asian nation to join the U.S.-led Global Coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS) and engaged in several other security agreements such as the Nuclear Security Initiative and Container Security Initiative. Singapore's involvement in these activities has helped boost the multilateral nature of U.S. counterterrorism efforts and encouraged other smaller countries to join in Adelman, 2012, p. 11-14).

A third significant benefit for the U.S. has been trade and investment relations. According to U.S. Ambassador to Singapore David Alderman, "The U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement is considered the most successful bilateral FTA ever signed by the U.S." In the first eight years of USSFTA, bilateral trade grew by over 59% (David I. Adelman, 2012, p. 11-14). In 2011, Singapore was the U.S.'s 11th largest export market, with U.S. exports to Singapore increasing by 7.7%, reaching \$31.4 billion. By the end of 2010, the bilateral trade surplus exceeded \$106 billion, and in 2011 the U.S. had a surplus of \$12.2 billion. The FTA also promoted direct investment from the U.S. to Singapore. In 2011, Singapore became the third-largest destination for U.S. Foreign Direct

Investment (FDI) in the Asia-Pacific, ahead of China, India, Indonesia, and other large regional markets (David I. Adelman, 2012, p. 11-14).

To this day, the U.S. continues to have a trade surplus with Singapore. As of 2022, U.S.-Singapore trade in goods and services reached \$122.7 billion, with U.S. exports totaling \$80.5 billion and imports from Singapore amounting to \$42.2 billion. The U.S. surplus in goods and services trade with Singapore amounted to \$38.3 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Singapore Trade & Investment Summary"). Of all Southeast Asian countries trading with the U.S., Singapore is the only one that consistently generates a trade surplus for the U.S.

In addition to these major benefits, the U.S. also benefits from arms sales, military equipment transactions, and educational cooperation with Singapore, explaining why U.S. leaders, including President Joe Biden, frequently praise the Singapore-U.S. partnership. In a meeting with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in March 2022, President Biden emphasized: "... today, that partnership is as important as ever. In fact, I think it's becoming even more important" (Biden, March 29, 2022).

### **C. The Impact of Singapore-US Relations on ASEAN-US Relations**

Singapore-US relations are not only the relations between two sovereign, independent countries but also between an ASEAN member and one of its most important partners. Thus, every development in Singapore-US relations directly affects ASEAN-US relations. From a security perspective, Singapore provides the United States with a presence in Southeast Asia, supporting ASEAN's policy of balancing relations with major powers, particularly with the US and China. The positive developments in Singapore-US relations have encouraged most ASEAN countries, including those less inclined towards the US, such as Malaysia, to strengthen ties with America. As a result, Indonesia and Malaysia decided to upgrade their relations with the United States to a strategic partnership in 2015. One of Singapore's significant contributions to ASEAN-US relations is its initiative to organize an ASEAN-US Summit. This idea, proposed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2008, received support from ASEAN, its member states, and the US. For ASEAN, holding high-level summits with the US was considered necessary and urgent. Since 1997, with the establishment of the ASEAN+3 cooperation mechanism and three ASEAN+1 processes, ASEAN has been holding annual summits with the three Northeast Asian countries—China, Japan, and South Korea. Following these meetings, ASEAN holds bilateral summits with China, Japan, and South Korea. The lack of a similar summit with the US made it difficult for ASEAN to balance its relations with major powers. The United States is the only superpower in the world with highly significant political, economic, and strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia's issues, especially security concerns in the region, cannot be resolved without the involvement of the US. Holding a high-level summit with the US presents an opportunity for ASEAN to convince America to refocus on Southeast Asia, a region that ceased to be a priority in US foreign policy after the Cold War. Similarly, ASEAN members hope the US will increase its presence in Southeast Asia to help balance relations with China, which many ASEAN countries view as a long-term threat. From the US perspective, holding a summit with ASEAN aligns with the "Rebalancing" strategy pursued by President Barack Obama. The goal of this strategy is: (i) to elevate the role and maintain the leadership position of the US in the Asia-Pacific region; (ii) to safeguard American interests in the Asia-Pacific, including protecting US territories, citizens, and access to the Asian market.

In promoting this strategy, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laid out six key action principles in her speech on US Asia policy in October 2010: (i) Strengthening bilateral security alliances; (ii) Deepening relationships with emerging countries, including China; (iii) Engaging in multilateral regional organizations; (iv) Expanding trade and investment; (v) Building a robust and comprehensive military foundation; and (vi) Promoting democracy and human rights.

In this strategy, Southeast Asia plays a critical role. Secretary Clinton regarded ASEAN as “the anchor for the emerging regional architecture” (APEC, EAS). Given this significance, Southeast Asia became a focal point in President Obama’s “Rebalancing” policy. In a speech following the ASEAN leaders’ summit in December 2009, President Obama emphasized: “As the first US president with a personal stake in the region, I reaffirm to my ASEAN friends that the US is committed to strengthening its engagement with Southeast Asia both with our allies, partners, and with ASEAN as an institution” (Vòng quanh Đông Nam Á, March 2003, p. 25).

The summit with ASEAN presented an opportunity for the US to fulfill President Obama’s commitment.

Following this consensus from both parties, the first ASEAN-US Summit was convened in Singapore on November 15, 2009. In the joint statement with ASEAN leaders, President Obama welcomed ASEAN’s plans to achieve the ASEAN Community by 2015, based on the ASEAN Charter, and reaffirmed his commitment to these plans (U.S.-ASEAN Leaders Joint Statement). Both sides agreed to enhance cooperation and create a Group of Eminent Persons to assist in strengthening ASEAN-US relations and addressing regional and global issues. The statement also affirmed the establishment of joint efforts in education exchanges, science and technology, labor cooperation, counterterrorism, development, nuclear nonproliferation, disarmament, climate change research, and appropriate policy measures.

Besides these issues, the statement also emphasized that the second ASEAN-US summit would take place in 2010. By the end of 2013, the ASEAN-US Summit process had been institutionalized, marking the creation of a new ASEAN +1 mechanism: ASEAN +1 with the US. This mechanism facilitated annual meetings between ASEAN leaders and the US to discuss common issues and propose new cooperation plans. Under this new institutional framework, ASEAN-US relations developed rapidly during Obama’s presidency. At the third ASEAN-US Summit in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, leaders decided to elevate ASEAN-US relations to a strategic partnership. To implement this partnership, an action plan (2016-2020) was adopted, focusing on five key areas: Political and security; Economics; Social and culture; Connectivity; Sustainable development.

After this upgrade, a special summit hosted by President Obama took place at Sunnylands, California, in February 2016. The summit discussed future cooperation and the guiding principles of the relationship. On this occasion, the leaders adopted the joint Sunnylands Declaration. After the summit, various cooperative initiatives between ASEAN and the US were advanced.

However, under President Donald Trump (2017-2020), ASEAN-US relations stagnated and even declined. Despite loud announcements regarding the Indo-Pacific Strategy at the 2017 APEC summit in Hanoi, there were no significant US activities in Southeast Asia to implement this strategy. On the contrary, the Trump administration’s actions, such as withdrawing from TPP, allowed China more room to extend its influence in the region. By August 2018, the US had not yet appointed an ambassador to ASEAN after the first nominee, K.T. McFarland, withdrew.

President Trump also did not attend the ASEAN summit in Singapore at the end of 2018 as expected. These US actions caused concern within ASEAN, especially amidst China's increasingly assertive activities in the South China Sea, attempting to draw ASEAN countries to support its new regional initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative. Faced with this situation, ASEAN states were caught between choosing sides in the US-China competition in Southeast Asia. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore even voiced his concern over such a difficult choice. Speaking at the conclusion of the ASEAN summit in Singapore on November 16, 2018, he warned of the "situations that could force ASEAN to choose between sides," and expressed hope that "this does not happen soon" (Michelle Jamrisko, Jason Koutsoukis, and Toluse Olorunnipa, 2018).

To avoid making a choice between the US and China, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sought to reinvigorate US attention on Southeast Asia. The 1990 MOU extension was aimed at this purpose. In diplomacy, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong criticized the instability in US policy towards Southeast Asia, while urging the US to maintain its commitment to ASEAN. This goal was reiterated in the joint statements between Singapore and the US during high-level exchanges. Indeed, in the joint statement with President Trump during Prime Minister Lee's visit to the US in 2016, "Both sides emphasized the importance of the US-ASEAN strategic partnership and the principles that underpin this relationship, as outlined in the Sunnylands Declaration of 2016" (Prime Minister's Office Singapore, October 24, 2017).

After President Joe Biden took office in January 2021 and adjusted US policy towards Southeast Asia to revive Obama's "Rebalancing" strategy with new approaches, Singapore welcomed the policy. Just before the ASEAN-US Special Summit hosted by President Biden in Washington D.C. in May 2022, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visited the US. His visit not only showed Singapore's support for the new US policy towards ASEAN but also served as a prelude to the participation of other ASEAN leaders in the event. In a joint press conference with Prime Minister Lee, President Biden affirmed: "As we look to the future, Prime Minister Lee and I share a commitment to ASEAN—and the central role the region plays in everything we do. I look forward to welcoming ASEAN leaders to Washington D.C. for this special summit this spring" (The White House, March 29, 2022). With proactive engagement from both Singapore and the US, the second ASEAN-US special summit was a success. At the summit, the leaders decided to elevate bilateral relations to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, equivalent to ASEAN-China relations upgraded earlier that year.

From these analyses, it is evident that Singapore and the US not only contribute to joint efforts in ASEAN-US relations but also play a crucial role in driving the relationship's development.

## Conclusion

After 20 years of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's leadership, Singapore-U.S. relations have seen significant growth and achieved many important accomplishments. New areas of cooperation have been introduced, while traditional fields have been upgraded or deepened. Trust between the two countries has increasingly been reinforced. Economic integration between Singapore and the U.S. was initiated as soon as Lee Hsien Loong assumed office and has acted as a driving force behind the robust growth of trade and investment relations. However, alongside these encouraging results, several challenges persist. These include geopolitical differences, divergences in economic

interests regarding the TPP, and discrepancies in human rights practices and perspectives. These issues are challenging to address due to Singapore's national interests not aligning with the U.S.'s as a superpower.

Unlike other smaller Southeast Asian countries' relations with the U.S., the Singapore-U.S. relationship has unique characteristics. Despite the asymmetry in many aspects, this relationship, between a small and a major power, is relatively equitable and mutually beneficial. Singapore has achieved a fairly equal standing in its relationship with the U.S. by strategically leveraging its geopolitical and geostrategic resources, skillfully playing the China card, capitalizing on collective strength within ASEAN, and rallying other smaller countries around itself. Another distinct feature of this relationship is the pragmatic approach both Singapore and the U.S. follow.

The Singapore-U.S. relationship provides tangible and intangible benefits to both parties. Tangible benefits for Singapore include profits from the U.S. market, from the operations of U.S. companies in Singapore, and access to U.S. defense technology. The intangible benefits include the security shield provided by the U.S. presence in Singapore and a heightened position in its relations with China. The U.S. also enjoys similar benefits in its relationship with Singapore, gaining a strategic presence in Southeast Asia. In trade, the U.S. has reaped the greater share of benefits, with its multinational companies using Singapore as a base for expanding their business operations in Asia. The sale of weapons to Singapore also brings substantial financial returns to the U.S. The intangible benefit the U.S. gains from its relationship with Singapore is the broader influence this relationship has on its ties with other ASEAN countries.

The Singapore-U.S. partnership has provided a significant impetus for the development of ASEAN-U.S. relations. Thanks to the collaboration between these two nations, the ASEAN-U.S. summit mechanism was formalized in 2013. Under the influence of this framework, ASEAN-U.S. relations have flourished, evolving into a comprehensive strategic partnership by May 2022.

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