



U.S.-Singapore Relations

Overview

Though only about three times the size of Washington, DC, and with a population of 5.3 million, the city-state of Singapore exercises economic and diplomatic influence on a par with much larger countries. Its stable government, strong economic performance, educated citizenry, and strategic position along key shipping lanes afford it leverage and a role in regional and global affairs. As the United States implements the Obama Administration's strategic "rebalance" to Asia, Singapore is a partner in both trade and security cooperation. At the same time, Singapore's leaders aim to strike a balance among the region's powers and also maintain close relations with China.

The U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA) went into effect in January 2004—the United States' first bilateral FTA with an Asian country—and trade has burgeoned. In 2013, Singapore was the 17th largest U.S. trading partner, with \$50 billion in total two-way goods trade, and a substantial destination for U.S. foreign direct investment. It is one of 12 nations negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Obama Administration's signature economic initiative in Asia. Mutual security interests also strengthen ties between Singapore and the United States. A formal strategic partnership agreement allows the United States to access Singapore military facilities and provides the basis for U.S.-Singapore cooperation in counterterrorism, counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, joint military exercises, policy dialogues, and shared defense technology.

Singapore Politics

The People's Action Party (PAP) has won every general election since the end of the colonial era in 1959, aided by its success in delivering consistent economic growth, as well as Singapore's fragmented opposition and electoral procedures that strongly favor the ruling party. In recent years, some observers have pointed to changes in the political and social environment that may portend more political pluralism, including generational changes and an increasingly international outlook among Singaporeans. In May 2011, opposition parties claimed their most successful results in history, taking six of the unicameral Parliament's 87 elected seats, and garnering about 40% of the popular vote. Though this still left the PAP with an overwhelming majority in Parliament, the ruling party described the election as a watershed moment for Singapore and vowed to reform the party to respond to the public's concerns, which appeared to focus mainly on the growing cost of living and wealth disparities.

Perceptions of generational changes in Singapore were highlighted further by the March 22, 2015, death of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew at age 91. Lee, Singapore's first prime minister, was widely heralded as the architect of Singapore's success as a nation and its rapid economic development, although much of the country's authoritarian politics derived from Lee's efforts to constrain political opposition. Lee served as prime minister from Singapore's independence in 1959 until 1991, and Lee's eldest son is current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who has been in office since 2004.

Singapore's leaders have acknowledged a "contract" with the Singaporean people, under which individual rights are curtailed in the interest of maintaining a stable, prosperous society. Supporters praise Singapore's pragmatism, noting its sustained economic growth and high standards of living. Others criticize the approach as stunting creativity and entrepreneurship, and contributing to rising disparities of income in Singapore's expanding population.

Although it has been elected by a comfortable majority in every election since Singapore's founding, the PAP "has used the government's extensive powers to place formidable obstacles in the path of political opponents," according to the U.S. State Department's 2013 Country Report on Human Rights Practices. According to Amnesty International, defamation suits by PAP leaders to discourage opposition are widespread. The political careers of several opposition politicians are marked by characteristic obstacles erected by the ruling party, including being forced to declare bankruptcy for failing to pay libel damages to prominent PAP members.

U.S.-Singapore Defense Cooperation

The 2005 "Strategic Framework Agreement" formalizes the bilateral security and defense relationship between the United States and Singapore. The agreement, the first of its kind that the United States signed with a non-ally since the Cold War, builds on the U.S. strategy of "places-not-bases" in the region, a concept that allows the U.S. military access to facilities on a rotational basis without bringing up sensitive sovereignty issues. The agreement allows the United States to operate resupply vessels from Singapore and to use a naval base, a ship repair facility, and an airfield on the island-state. The U.S. Navy also maintains a logistical command unit—Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific—in Singapore that serves to coordinate warship deployment and logistics in the region. Singapore's Changi Naval base is one of the few facilities in the world that can accommodate a U.S. aircraft carrier.

Starting in 2013, the U.S. Navy deployed a littoral combat ship (LCS) to Singapore for a 10-month tour, and then deployed a second beginning in 2014. By 2018, the Navy plans to rotationally deploy four LCS ships from the Seventh Fleet in Singapore. The stationing of the LCSs is emblematic of the role that Singapore can play in the U.S. “strategic rebalancing” to the region by providing a U.S. Navy presence in Southeast and Northeast Asia. The USS *Freedom*, the first LCS stationed in Singapore, performed patrols in the South China Sea, participated in exercises with other countries, and delivered relief supplies to the Philippines in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan. The second LCS, the USS *Fort Worth*, participated in search and rescue operations for a commercial aircraft operated by Air Asia that crashed in Indonesian waters in early 2015.

Law Enforcement Cooperation

The United States and Singapore engage in ongoing law enforcement cooperation. Singapore is a transit point for a wide range of individuals, including suspected terrorists from neighboring countries, and its active port is a transshipment point. In the past, some U.S. officials have expressed concerns about the strength of cooperation. The State Department’s 2013 country report on terrorism, however, said that cooperation has “benefited from improved working level dialogue on many of the issues that had previously impeded the development of more strategic and productive agency-to-agency relationships.” Among U.S. priorities are improvements in Singapore’s port security, where the Department of Homeland Security hopes to see Singapore make greater use of advance manifests to screen containers through its busy port, and improvements to the bilateral extradition treaty.

Singapore Economy and U.S. Trade Relations

Singapore’s GDP per capita is \$55,182 (2013 estimate), one of the highest in the world. The city-state’s role as a regional trading hub means its economy depends heavily on trade. Annual trade volumes processed through the Singapore port are around three times Singapore’s domestic GDP. It relies on exports of consumer electronics, information technology products, pharmaceuticals, and financial services. China, Malaysia, and the United States are Singapore’s largest trading partners. Cumulative U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Singapore exceeds \$138 billion, making it the largest Southeast Asian destination for U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI).

The TPP participants represent a third of the world’s trade. Singapore’s record of championing rigorous trade pacts raises its prominence as a negotiating partner in pushing for a comprehensive agreement. However, trade observers say that, in the TPP, Singapore faces sensitive issues in negotiations over financial services and the imposition of free-market disciplines on state-owned enterprises.

Singapore has concluded at least 18 free trade agreements (FTAs) and is pursuing several more, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a

16-nation group of Asian nations that is negotiating a free trade agreement at the same time some of its members are working on the TPP. (RCEP’s members include ASEAN’s 10 nations, plus Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. The nations that are involved in both TPP and RCEP are Australia, Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Vietnam.) Singapore does not face some of the obstacles that other countries do in trade negotiations because, in addition to having a mature, globalized economy, it has virtually no agricultural sector and its manufacturing is limited to specialized sectors such as high-end electronic products and pharmaceuticals.

Singapore’s Regional Role

Singapore was a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the 10-member regional forum that helps Southeast Asia’s mostly small countries to influence regional diplomacy, particularly vis-à-vis China. (ASEAN’s members are Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.) Singapore has praised the Administration’s “rebalancing” effort toward Asia, yet has been careful to warn that anti-China rhetoric or efforts to “contain” China’s rise will be counterproductive. Singapore often portrays itself as a useful balancer and intermediary between major powers in the region. In ongoing territorial and sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, Singapore, a non-claimant, has characterized its stance on the issue as neutral, yet concerned because of the threat to maritime stability. Singapore’s ties with Beijing are multifaceted and extend to cultural, political, and educational exchanges as well. Singapore adheres to a one-China policy, but has an extensive relationship with Taiwan and has managed to avoid jeopardizing its strong relations with Beijing.

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