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# U.S.-Singapore Relations

## Overview

Though geographically only about three times the size of Washington, DC, and with a population of about 5.9 million, the city-state of Singapore exerts economic and diplomatic influence on par with much larger countries. Its stable government, strong economic performance, educated citizenry, and strategic position along key shipping lanes afford it a large role in regional and global affairs. For the United States, Singapore has been a partner in both trade and security initiatives and an advocate of a strong U.S. role in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, Singapore's leaders have aimed to maintain close relations with China, and to maintain positive ties with all regional powers.

The United States and Singapore have extensive trade and investment ties. The U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which went into effect in January 2004, was the first U.S. bilateral FTA with an Asian country. In 2019, U.S.-Singapore trade totaled about \$91.6 billion, and Singapore was the 14<sup>th</sup> largest goods export market for the United States. That same year, the U.S. trade surplus with Singapore amounted to \$18.3 billion. Singapore is a party to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (CPTPP), an 11-nation agreement that evolved from the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), from which the United States withdrew in 2017, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a 15-nation regional trade pact.

Although not a U.S. treaty ally, Singapore is one of the strongest U.S. security partners in the region. A formal strategic partnership agreement allows the United States to access Singaporean military facilities and promotes cooperation on issues ranging from counterterrorism to counter-proliferation to cyber and space domains.

## Singapore and the Ukraine Invasion

On March 5, 2022, Singapore announced a range of export controls and sanctions against Russian entities, aiming “to constrain Russia’s capacity to conduct war against Ukraine and undermine its sovereignty.” The actions were notably strong from Singapore, which traditionally has been loath to impose unilateral sanctions against sovereign states. Singapore has also provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, contributing emergency vehicles as well as other medical and rescue supplies.

## Singapore and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Singapore has performed well in responding to the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and has one of the lowest fatality rates in the world. Public health experts praised Singapore’s rapid early actions, including extensive monitoring of cases and their contacts, temperature checks at building entrances, and clear public messaging. Over 87% of the population was fully vaccinated as of July 2022, and in March 2022, the government lifted or relaxed many of its health-related restrictions on public gathering.

## Singapore Politics

Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP) has won every general election since the end of the British colonial era in 1959, and it continues to enjoy widespread support. The PAP has delivered consistent economic growth and benefited from the country’s fragmented opposition and pro-incumbent electoral procedures, in addition to adopting policies that stifle political dissent. 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. In the most recent general election, held in July 2020 against the backdrop of COVID-19, the PAP won 83 of 93 parliamentary seats, but a record number of opposition parties participated, and the PAP’s share of the popular vote dropped to 61%, compared with 70% in the previous 2015 polls.

Increasingly, PAP officials are preparing for a change in the party’s leadership. In 2015, the country’s long-time leader Lee Kuan Yew died. He was widely heralded as the architect of Singapore’s success and its rapid economic development. Much of the country’s authoritarian politics derived from Lee’s efforts to constrain political opposition. Lee’s eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, is the country’s current prime minister, in office since 2004. Lawrence Wong, current Finance Minister, appears to be the next presumptive leader after Lee steps down. Wong led the COVID response team and is reportedly publically popular for his less formal style.

Singapore’s leaders refer to a “contract” with the Singaporean people, under which some individual rights are curtailed in the interest of maintaining a stable, prosperous society. However, PAP leaders speak of the need to reform the party to respond to the public’s concerns, which appear to focus on rising living costs, wealth disparities, public health, and immigration. Some observers praise Singapore’s pragmatism, noting its sustained economic growth and high standards of living. Others criticize the government’s paternalistic approach, saying that it stunts creativity and contributes to rising income inequality.

The U.S. government has criticized some aspects of Singapore’s political system. The U.S. State Department’s *2021 Human Rights Report* cited “preventive detention by the government under various laws that dispense with regular judicial due process; monitoring private electronic or telephone conversations without a warrant; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including criminal libel laws; restrictions on internet freedom; substantial legal and regulatory limitations on the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association; and existence of a law criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between men, although not enforced.” In the

past, the PAP has used defamation suits and libel damages to bankrupt opposition politicians.

## U.S.-Singapore Defense Cooperation

The “Strategic Framework Agreement” formalizes the bilateral security relationship between the United States and Singapore. The agreement, which was signed in 2005 and is the first of its kind with a non-ally since the Cold War, builds on the U.S. strategy of “places-not-bases”—a concept that aims to provide the U.S. military with access to foreign facilities on a largely rotational basis, thereby avoiding sensitive sovereignty issues. In 2015, the two countries agreed to an “enhanced” cooperation agreement, and the United States began deploying surveillance aircraft to Singapore around the same time. The FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act included language that recognized Singapore as a major security cooperation partner, reflecting the term first used in the 2005 agreement.

Singapore is a substantial market for U.S. military goods, with \$8.5 billion in active sales under the Foreign Military Sales system in 2021, in addition to over \$37.6 billion in defense articles via Direct Commercial Sales since 2016. In March 2022, the two countries established an annual cyber security dialogue to discuss critical information infrastructure, critical technology cybersecurity, and other issues across multiple agencies. Another dialogue on space is among the several strategic bilateral initiatives.

The U.S. Navy maintains a logistical command unit—Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific—in Singapore that coordinates regional warship deployments and logistics. Singapore’s Changi Naval Base is one of the few facilities in the world that can accommodate a U.S. aircraft carrier. Singapore-stationed U.S. littoral combat ships and P-8 Poseidon aircraft have performed patrols in the South China Sea, participated in exercises with other countries, and provided disaster relief. Singaporean troops have served in non-combat roles at U.S. Central Command and at the Combined Joint Task Force’s headquarters.

Singapore participates in multilateral regional military exercises and several bilateral exercises with the U.S. military on an annual basis. Singapore operates three permanent advanced fighter jet training detachments in the continental United States, and in December 2019 the United States and Singapore agreed to establish a fourth in Guam.

## Law Enforcement Cooperation

The United States and Singapore engage in ongoing law enforcement cooperation. According to some, such cooperation is crucial, given that Singapore is the busiest transshipment hub in the world, and is a transit point for millions of air passengers, including suspected terrorists. Singapore is part of the U.S.-led Container Security Initiative, and in 2014, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency signed three agreements with Singapore, providing a legal framework for the customs authorities to together counter trafficking, proliferation, and terrorism.

## Singapore Economy and U.S. Trade Relations

Singapore’s GDP per capita (PPP) is one of the world’s highest at \$101,649. The country’s role as a regional

entrepôt means that its economy depends heavily on trade. Singapore’s annual trade volumes are more than three times the country’s annual GDP, and in 2018, its port handled about 630 million tons of cargo. Singapore exports consumer electronics, information technology products, and pharmaceuticals. It also is one of the top three oil-refining centers in the world, even though it has no natural resources of its own. China is Singapore’s largest trading partner, and the United States is its biggest foreign investor. In 2019, the stock of U.S. foreign direct investment in Singapore totaled \$288 billion, accounting for around 80% of total U.S. investment in Southeast Asia. Between 2008 and 2016, the TPP was the primary trade initiative between the United States and Singapore. After the United States withdrew from the agreement, Singapore, along with 10 other countries, moved ahead with the revised CPTPP.

Singapore has concluded 22 bilateral and regional FTAs, including the U.S.-Singapore FTA (2003), the CPTPP, and the RCEP. Singapore has a largely pro-trade liberalization policy: it has a mature, globalized economy, virtually no agricultural sector, and its manufacturing industry is focused on specialized products such as high-end electronics and pharmaceuticals. The country’s leaders are concerned about the potential impact of Sino-U.S.-trade disputes on the Singapore economy.

## Singapore’s Regional Role

Singapore is a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a forum that aims to prevent disputes and encourage cooperation, and helps Southeast Asia’s mostly small countries influence regional diplomacy. ASEAN’s members are Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Singapore encourages greater U.S. engagement in Asia, but calls efforts to “contain” China’s rise counterproductive. Singapore maintains generally good relations with China, at least partly as a hedge against possible U.S. retrenchment. However, in 2016, Singapore supported an international tribunal’s ruling deeming many of China’s claims in the South China Sea as having no legal basis. Though it adheres to a one-China policy, Singapore has a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan. Singapore casts itself as a useful intermediary between developed and developing countries in fora like international climate negotiations.

Singapore plays an important role in diplomacy surrounding the political crisis in Burma (Myanmar), where the military seized power in a February 1, 2021, coup d’état. By some measures, Singapore is Burma’s largest trading partner, and reportedly is an important banking and health-care center for senior Burmese military officials. Singapore officials have been active in regional efforts to push Burma’s junta to lessen violence, but have opposed the imposition of further economic sanctions, arguing that isolating the military would be counterproductive.

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