



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 strike a balance among the region's 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. Since then, trade between the two countries has almost doubled. In 2018, U.S.-Singapore trade totaled about \$60 billion in goods, and Singapore was the 12th largest goods export market for the United States. That same year, the U.S. trade surplus with Singapore amounted to \$5.9 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.

Although it is 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 provides the basis for U.S.-Singapore cooperation on issues relating to counterterrorism, counter-proliferation, and joint military exercises.

Singapore Politics

Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) has won every general election since the end of the British colonial era in 1959. Even today, the PAP enjoys widespread support. It has delivered consistent economic growth, and benefited from the country's fragmented opposition and pro-incumbent electoral procedures. 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 many Singaporeans. However, in the most recent general election, held in 2015, the PAP won 83 of 89 parliamentary seats. It tallied 69.9% of the popular vote, up from an all-time low of 60.1% in 2011. In Singapore, voting is compulsory, and 93.7% of eligible voters cast ballots in the 2015 election.

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 Singapore's first prime minister, serving from 1959 until 1990. He was widely heralded as the architect of Singapore's success and its rapid economic development, although much of the country's authoritarian politics derived from Lee's efforts to constrain the political opposition. Lee's eldest son, Lee Hsien Loong, is the country's current prime minister. He has been in office since 2004, but he has indicated that he wants to step down in the next few years. In November 2018, the PAP announced a new party leadership slate, and a group of younger party leaders, known as the 4G (fourth generation) group, chose Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat as its head, indicating that he is likely to succeed Lee as Prime Minister. The government must hold elections by January 2021, but many expect polls could be held as early as this year.

Singapore's leaders have acknowledged a "contract" with the Singaporean people, under which some individual rights are curtailed in the interest of maintaining a stable, prosperous society. (In the 1960s, intercommunal violence, primarily between ethnic Chinese and Malays, racked the country.) 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, and immigration. Some observers praise Singapore's pragmatism, noting its sustained economic growth and high standards of living. Yet, others criticize the government's paternalistic approach, saying that it stunts creativity and entrepreneurship and contributes to rising income inequality.

The United States has criticized some aspects of Singapore's political system. The U.S. State Department's *2018 Human Rights Report* mentioned "preventive detention by government authorities under various laws that dispense with regular judicial due process; monitoring private electronic or telephone communications without a warrant; significant restrictions on the press and online, including the use of defamation laws to discourage criticism; [and] laws and regulations significantly limiting the right of peaceful assembly and freedom of association." In the past, the party 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-U.S. 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 United States and Singapore agreed to an "enhanced" cooperation

agreement, and the United States began deploying surveillance aircraft to Singapore around the same time. Singapore is a substantial market for U.S. military goods, and it has indicated interest in procuring four F-35 jets.

The U.S. Navy maintains a logistical command unit—Commander, Logistics Group Western Pacific—in Singapore that coordinates warship deployments 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, and Singapore-stationed littoral combat ships (LCSs) have performed patrols in the South China Sea, participated in exercises with other countries, and delivered relief supplies to the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan.

In November 2014, Singapore became the first Southeast Asia country to join the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State (IS). Singaporean troops have served in non-combat roles at U.S. Central Command and at the Combined Joint Task Force’s headquarters. The country also has contributed an air-to-air refueling tanker, an imagery analysis unit, and a medical team to the anti-IS effort. Singapore also made small contributions to allied efforts in both Iraq conflicts and Afghanistan, and has contributed to numerous U.N. peacekeeping operations, including in Cambodia, Timor-Leste, and Nepal.

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 from neighboring countries. In the past, some U.S. officials have expressed concerns about Singapore’s willingness to cooperate, but the State Department’s most recent *Country Report on Terrorism* states that “Singapore [has been] a committed, active, and effective counterterrorism partner.” Singapore is part of the U.S.-led Container Security Initiative (CSI), and in 2014, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency signed three agreements with the country, providing a legal framework for the two countries’ customs authorities to work together to counter trafficking, proliferation, and terrorist-related activities.

Singapore Economy and U.S. Trade Relations

Singapore’s GDP per capita (PPP) is one of the world’s highest at \$94,100. The country’s role as a regional entrepot 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, but the United States is its biggest foreign investor. In 2017, the stock of U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) in Singapore totaled \$274 billion, accounting for around 80% of total U.S. investment in Southeast Asia.

Previously, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was the primary trade initiative between the United States and Singapore. The United States withdrew from the agreement in January 2017, but Singapore, along with 10 other countries, moved ahead with the revised CPTPP. In March 2017, Prime Minister Lee said that the U.S. withdrawal “put a dent in the degree to which people can be confident in America’s policies.”

As a trade-dependent economy, Singapore has pursued a wide range of trade agreements. It has concluded 22 bilateral and regional free trade agreements (FTAs), including the U.S.-Singapore FTA and the CPTPP, and is pursuing several more, including the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which involves 16 Asian nations. Singapore faces relatively few obstacles when conducting trade negotiations. 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, however, are concerned about the impact that Sino-U.S.-trade disputes may have on the Singapore economy.

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 influence regional diplomacy, particularly vis-à-vis China. (ASEAN’s members are Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.)

Singapore has encouraged greater U.S. engagement in Asia, but it has warned that efforts to “contain” China’s rise would be counterproductive. In a May 2019 speech in Washington DC, Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said “viewing China purely as an adversary to be contained will not work in the long term, given the entire spectrum of issues that will require cooperation between the U.S. and China.” Of late, Singapore has worked to smooth its ties with China—perhaps at least partly as a hedge against possible U.S. disengagement from the region. That being said, in 2016, Singapore supported an international tribunal’s ruling against China’s claims in the South China Sea (SCS). (Singapore is a non-claimant in the SCS dispute, and has characterized its stance as neutral.) Singapore has a strong relationship with Taiwan, but it nonetheless adheres to a one-China policy.

Singapore also portrays itself as a useful intermediary, providing a bridge to developing countries in fora like international climate negotiations. In June 2018, Singapore hosted the first meeting between President Trump and North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-Un.

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