

# A Special Relationship Not So Special Anymore: Changing Dynamics of China-Singapore Relations

Daniel S. Kang and Young Nam Cho

This paper investigates the changes in China's strategic partnership with Singapore under the influences of China's rise and the escalating US-China rivalry. When China had just started its economic reform, it was attracted by Singapore's capabilities of maintaining high economic growth with strong party leadership, laying the foundation for a special relationship. But Singapore soon had to learn to strategically rebalance its policies in new geopolitical realities with China's rising power. Differing national interests has put China-Singapore relations at a new low point. To deliver the above argument, this paper reviews the start of the China-Singapore relationship, then analyzes the changes in the development of China-Singapore relations in the economic and political spheres. The main findings are that China and Singapore's pragmatism in the struggle for power and survival erodes past relations and that political deterioration overpowers economic cooperation despite its expansion.

**Keywords** China-Singapore relations, China's rise, US-China rivalry, US-Singapore ties, strategic rebalancing

## INTRODUCTION

As a small state with limited resources, Singapore adopted the strategy of utilizing diplomacy and has been a long supporter of major multilateral institutions. Singapore managed to create an impressive international footprint especially in its defense strategy, in which it maintains its connections with the United States along with other key US

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**Daniel S. Kang** is a Master's candidate at the Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University, Email: [dkang513@snu.ac.kr](mailto:dkang513@snu.ac.kr)

**Young Nam Cho** is a Professor at the Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University, Email: [yncho@snu.ac.kr](mailto:yncho@snu.ac.kr)

This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea's Brain Korea 21 FOUR Program "Cultivating the Next Generation of Academic Leaders in Interdisciplinary Studies of International Area and Development Cooperation for A New National Strategy" at the Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University.

Article Received: 17-04-2023 Revised: 23-05-2023 Accepted: 01-06-2023

allies like Great Britain, Taiwan, and India for training bases and combined exercises (Tan, 2011). One of Singapore's primary objectives is to uphold regional balance of power, and the US plays the most crucial role in this scenario. Despite this fact, China and Singapore exchanged favorable sentiments by pledging their continued commitment to maintain positive relations in the 30th year anniversary of the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 2020. What is even more surprising is that the rhetoric is also shared by the Chinese general public, where in a survey conducted in China showed that the public had an amiable view of Singaporeans. Close to three quarters of the respondents had responded that they were either "very favorable" or "favorable" in their views towards the Singapore. This trend was in contrast to the other high income countries like the United States, Japan, and Australia which received "unfavorable" views of 77 percent, 58 percent, and 47 percent respectively (Kwek et al., 2021). What factors then, have contributed to the friendly relations between China and Singapore? And what makes Singapore so special?

The literature towards China-Singapore relations can be divided into three broad perspectives. The first view is that China-Singapore relations has broadened and will continue to broaden in the future. To (2001) argues that after securing official bilateral ties in 1990 not only economic interactions but educational and cultural exchanges also expanded, which can lead to a more mature relationship in the twenty-first century. Fook (2018) adds on to this argument by supplementing that although there have been some obstacles in the bilateral relationship, deeper interaction like inter-governmental projects and people to people exchanges has helped the two states reach a significant milestone. Wu (2021) analyzed the 30 years of China-Singapore relations and agreed that there were political frictions especially in the South China Seas issue. However, there are very positive prospects in the financial sector and also new opportunities to build a stronger relationship by fighting COVID-19 together. In short, political friction is inevitable, especially with China's rising power and its rivalry with the United States, but China and Singapore has many other aspects in which they can continue beneficial relations.

The second view is that China's pursuit of the "Singapore Model" is only political rhetoric and the governance knowledge transfers are limited and partial at best. A few reasons for this are the sheer size difference of the two states, China's selective lesson drawing from the model and the Chinese emphasis on material concerns (Lim and Horesh, 2016; Ortmann and Thompson, 2018; Ho, 2018). These arguments are drawn from the observations of the limited implementations of the government to government projects and Chinese cadre training in Singaporean universities that do not seem to give the expected results. But why China continues to praise the Singapore model were the two states' continued emphasis on pragmatic economic benefits and also the political attractiveness to refer to an Asian developmental model rather than a Western model.

The third and last view is that although the two states enjoyed a special relationship in the past, China-Singapore relations in the present are deteriorating. Tan (2017) argues that relations deteriorated since 2010 due to Singapore's stance on the South China Seas and its support for the US's "Pivot to Asia" strategy. Despite growing economic relations, it could not stop political relations from reaching its lowest points. Chen (2018) adds that Singapore is implementing a hedging strategy to respond to a rising

China and overcome the fragility of being a small state. Lam (2021) further argues that China's relationship with Singapore will not be as attractive and useful even more so in the future due to its rising power status. Fan (2021) observed mutual distrust building between the two states with the South China Sea case, and factors like China's rise and Singapore's diplomatic philosophy only puts the relationship under more tests.

Drawing from the above arguments, my observation leans with the third view that China-Singapore relations are deteriorating. This is not an exceptional case for Singapore since the rise of China is impacting the strategic realignment of forces for all middle and small states. However, the reason for using Singapore in this particular study is that although Singapore in terms of size is a tiny state, what it had to offer to China in the reform and opening period was of crucial importance, which had been enough to say the two states had a special relationship. However, China's rise has significantly affected the bilateral relations, and this paper carries out the observation of middle and smaller states' strategic readjustments with the case of Singapore.

Since China has become the second largest economy in the world, Singapore bears less significance than before. Also, as a small state, Singapore headed towards much complicated strategic choices as the China-US rivalry escalated rapidly since the 2010s. Singapore will be more inclined to align itself closer to the United States rather than actively engage with China because of the Singaporean perception of the US's role of balancing the power dynamic in Asia. With these recent developments we can see that China-Singapore relations may not be so special after all. If one could say the bilateral relations had been special, what were the factors? Can we still say that China and Singapore maintains a special relationship that can cope the major external factor of the US-China rivalry? My central argument here is, China's rise has changed its foreign policy priorities and forced Singapore to strategically readjust from geopolitical realities for its survival, and as a consequence, the two countries' relations is not so special anymore.

To deliver the arguments to the questions proposed above, this paper implements a historical approach to analyze the key characteristics in the changing relationships of China-Singapore relations. The primary data used in this paper are the *China's Foreign Affairs (Zhongguo waijiao)*, annual white papers of China's diplomacy published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. The yearly editions cited in this paper are 2009, 2010, 2011, 2017 and 2018 for they capture the official perspectives of the Chinese government in years where there have been significant events mentioned in this paper that affected its bilateral relationship with Singapore. For example, the 2017 issue captures China's souring relationship with Singapore due to Singapore's firm stance with the international maritime law in the 2016 South China Sea dispute. Other primary resources include ASEAN trade statistics data and an interview transcript of Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. Secondary resources are obtained from English and Chinese journals as well as internet news sources to support the reasoning and arguments in the paper.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first part of this article reviews the development process of Singapore and China-Singapore relations. Then, it explains the mutually beneficial economic relations that make this relationship so special at first glance. In the third section, the US-China rivalry is traced to be one of the main reasons

of a shift in Chinese foreign policy, and in turn, the downturn of China-Singapore relations. Lastly, in the conclusion is a final analysis of the bilateral relations in the current state.

## AN INSIGNIFICANT COLONY TO A GLOBAL HUB

### Singapore's Development

In 1959, the tiny diamond-shaped island harbored two degrees north of the equator was given the right of self-governance (except for foreign affairs and defense) from Britain. Then in 1963, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia, only to leave it two years later to become a full independent country. However, the situation seemed bleak. Not only was its population small, it was also a diverse group of migrants that came from China, Malaysia, and India. There was almost no sense of shared cultural or historical intimacy among one another. Furthermore, there were no natural resources on the island, and the country had to depend on imports for basic necessities such as food and energy. Domestic poverty and unemployment levels were high. To make matters worse, it was geographically situated in a region entangled with communist insurgencies that spurred in the Cold War system.

What turned all this around was the one and only Lee Kuan Yew. Lee has served as the Prime Minister under the dominant People's Action Party (hereafter PAP) in Singapore since its self-governance all the way to 1990. To ensure the survival of his country, Lee had envisioned a strategy of strong government for a stable business environment. Graham Allison in his book, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World*, quotes Lee saying,

"When I started, the question was how Singapore can make a living against neighbors who have more natural resources, human resources, and bigger space. How did we differentiate ourselves from them? They are not clean systems; we run clean systems. Their rule of law is wonky; we stick to the law. Once we come to an agreement or make a decision, we stick to it. We become reliable and credible to investors. World-class infrastructure, world-class supporting staff, all educated in English. Good communication by air, by sea, by cable, by satellite, and now, over the internet. (Graham et al., 2010)"

Lee combined market-oriented capitalism with authoritarianism and communitarianism which Francis Fukuyama coined as "soft authoritarianism (Roy, 1994)". The policymaking was highly centralized with a top-down approach, strictly implemented into all aspects of politics and bureaucracy. In addition, an export-oriented development strategy was initiated to attract multinational firms to directly invest in Singapore and establish large government-led companies. The PAP had effectively implemented this strategy with aggressive steps to be involved in directing funds into the key domestic sectors, suppressing labor unions, promoting education, and continuing to develop its manufacturing base (Zarrol, 2019). As a result, Singapore had created a stable global business environment with efficient governance that attracts much foreign

investment from all over the world.

The task of maintaining economic growth and adapting to the fast changes of globalization was not an easy one, therefore, Singapore has thus far constantly reinvented itself to meet global demands. It has now a reputation of having world-class infrastructure, clean and stable governance, skilled workforce, and open trade routes. When Lee stepped in as the first Prime Minister of Singapore in 1965, the nation's GDP per capita was about USD 400. According to the Trading Economics data, Singapore's GDP per capita has recorded more than USD 58,000 in 2020, which is 4.6 times larger than the world's average (Trading Economics, 2022). From an impoverished tiny third world nation, it has overcome tremendous odds to emerge as one of the most competitive global business hubs in the world.

### **Not a 'Third China'**

According to the 2020 population census conducted by the Singapore Department of Singapore, the Chinese ethnicity makes up 74 percent of the population (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2021). Historically, these ethnic Chinese were poor migrants that came with the objective of making money then going back to mainland China. But many stayed and made a living on the island. Much of these Chinese migrants in Singapore at the time were still emotionally attached to the mainland, and there was much support from the migrants when Imperial Japan invaded China. However, interaction between overseas and mainland Chinese were cut off in the Mao-era, due to the political and social disturbance that was caused by the Great Leap Forward (1958~69) and the Cultural Revolution (1966~76) campaigns (Lam, 2021). Bilateral diplomatic relations had not been established at that time, and Singapore set travel restrictions to Maoist China.

At this time the PAP effectively cultivated an exclusive national identity that would be loyal to Singapore, not China. Singapore and China were on opposing sides of the ideological spectrum, with the latter threatening Singapore's survival with continuing communist insurgency support in neighboring Southeast Asian states. Lee Kuan Yew was a strong nationalist and anti-communist after witnessing the destruction of Japanese imperialism and communist radicalism in the 1940s. Therefore, he strictly maintained his vision to ensure an independent Singapore that would not be influenced by either. Lee even went to reaffirm the difference between China and Singapore in a government meeting with Mao Zedong in 1973 (Lim and Horesh, 2016).

Singapore had made tremendous efforts to not be seen as a 'third China' since pro-Chinese movements could stir racial conflicts with anti-Chinese Indonesia and Malaysia. On top of that, Lee also had to deal with ideological conflicts when the PAP had to withstand the political sabotage of internal Chinese communists during the 1963 election. Although the attempts were unsuccessful, it made Singapore's founding fathers cultivate a multi-ethnic identity that would reduce the effectiveness of Chinese cultural and ideological influence in domestic politics (Medeiros et al., 2008). The PAP emphasized multiculturalism and multilingualism to be an exclusive characteristic of being a Singaporean. It was much promoted through primary education systems, mass media, newspapers, and national day parades. The education system was the most

important driver as it was conducted bilingually, English and other mother tongues such as Chinese, Malaysian and Indian, from which the state indicates that the national language is English in Singapore.

Nevertheless, economic ties were maintained between China and Singapore despite the lack of official diplomatic relations. The balance of trade was around USD 750 million in the early 1970s. Singapore also allowed the Bank of China branch in Singapore to continue operating despite pressures from the Malaysian central government to shut it down. This decision was seen instrumental for the future beneficial relationship building between China and Singapore (Fook, 2018). The deterioration of China-Soviet relations in the 1960s and the *détente* in China-US relations in the 1970s paved the way for formal establishment of China-Singapore relations. China lessened its support and ties to communist insurgencies in the region, and established diplomatic relations with many Southeast Asian states such as Malaysia (1974) and Thailand (1975). But Singapore was still very much discreet in its engagement with China so as to avoid provoking unnecessary political turbulence with its Malay-Muslim neighbors. Its Chinese ethnic constituency could easily amplify the perception that Singaporean foreign policy is ethnically oriented, so Singapore has to consciously defer the issue especially in ASEAN politics (Kuik, 2008). For example, official diplomatic relations were established in October 1990 only after Indonesia and China had set diplomatic relations earlier in July.

## THE START OF A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

### Special Relations of Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew

Singapore had a cautious approach to establishing official relations with China because of the Cold war environment and also its dominant Chinese population (To, 2001). Lee Kuan Yew had to make far reaching efforts to gain the formal agreement of Chinese leaders they would not intrude in Southeast Asian communist affairs. But that did not mean China and Singapore's relationship was insignificant. According to Professor Wang Gungwu, the Director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore, China and Singapore already shared a special relationship that was shown by Mao Zedong's direct invitation to Lee Kuan Yew in 1973. Singapore was among the first Southeast Asian states to cooperate with China, and one of the closest. The formal bilateral relations that would be set in 1990 after China and Indonesia's would just be a formality.

The most significant milestone in China-Singapore relations was set when China's then-Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping made his visit to Singapore in 1978. Deng and Lee could develop personal ties that would become the center stone in the friendly relationship between the two states. The two leaders also had quite in common. Both were of Hakka-Chinese descents, both were anti-colonial and assumed the task of managing domestic revolutionary movements, and focused on maintaining political control (Erbaugh, 1992). Prior to Deng's visit, his image of Singapore was a tiny backward island full of landless peasants who had to leave China turned into a mere "running dog of imperialism". However, Deng was pleasantly shocked when he saw that



Singapore had made a dramatic transformation since its independence and had been left with a deep impression.

After Deng's visit to Singapore, *the People's Daily*, which is the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, he had described Singapore as a "garden city worth studying for its greening, public housing and tourism" (Fook, 2018). Deng expressed his admiration for Singapore in October 1979 where he explained how Singapore had effectively directed foreign capital and investments to foster the growth of its domestic economy. Deng also referred Singapore in his 1992 *Nanxun* (Southern Tour) speech where he said that the Chinese should learn from its effective governance that maintains good social order and that China do better (Tan, 2017). Deng's pragmatic approach to Singapore opened a new chapter of relations as it set off the "Singapore fever" in China that sent many party cadres to Singapore and learn from its governance and economic policies.

Deng realized through Singapore that it was possible to achieve a high level of economic development under strong government leadership. In other words, Singapore's governance model was a practical reference for China's socialist market economy. The frequent references to 'social order' and 'Asian values' among Chinese leaders pointed out the worries of social and political problems such as instability, unemployment, and foreign exploitation that could be caused by economic reforms. However, the PAP had maintained an iron grip on its monopoly on power, strict social rules, collectivism, government management of public affairs, and high levels of growth, all the while overcoming the threats that had risen with economic reform. The PAP's continuous one-party rule and its success in state development was a focal point of Chinese admiration.

### **The Singapore Fever**

Enthusiasm in the Singapore model spread like a fever among the Chinese leadership. Li Peng, former Premier of the PRC who oversaw the establishment and promotion of the establishment of China-Singapore diplomatic relations, praised Singapore for having a good social order and economy (The Straits Times, 2019). Qiao Shi, who was the head of the National People's Congress, also expressed keen interest in learning from the Singaporean legal system. Singaporeans like former deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, legislator Fong Sip Chee, and former chief planner of Singapore Liu Thai Ker had been directly appointed as China's policy advisors (Bolt, 1996). Many Chinese officials and cadres were sent to Singapore as a part of executive training and graduate education by the Chinese central government. When the program was first initiated in 1992, more than 400 officials and cadres were sent to Singapore in that year alone. By 2015, the then-Deputy Prime Minister (currently the Senior Minister) of Singapore Teo Chee Hean remarked at the Fifth Singapore-China Forum on Leadership that more than 50,000 persons from China had been sent to Singapore on study visits and programs (Teo, 2015). The CCP cadres still go to Singapore for the "Mayors' Class" today to learn from the diverse spectrum of governance from public management, anti-corruption, economic development, and so on. According to a study by Hong Liu and Ting-Yan Wang, what appeases the CCP cadres the most are the practical governance lessons (Liu and Wang, 2018).

The Chinese academia has also actively researched the Singapore governance system. The research was mostly focused on economic development in the reform and opening period. In the wake of the 1990s, there were much more diverse topics regarding Singapore. Research regarding the People's Action Party, party politics, and political culture were conducted. In 2008 the Shenzhen University Singapore Research Center was established which was directed by Singapore expert Lee Luanli, and many Chinese academics study under the political scientist Li Pan to study the Singaporean party system (Lim, 2018). According to Professor Lim Kye Soon of Hanyang University, she states that the prime reason for Chinese research in Singapore is for political development. However, due to the limitations of academic freedom in China she evaluates the research to be relatively less objective and more tuned to the Chinese views and standards of Chinese realism (Ibid.).

The current General Secretary Xi Jinping has also been found to be fond of Singapore. He visited in 1993 when he was the Fujian province governor and also discussed about the governance model with Lee Kuan Yew after being promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee in 2007 (Thompson and Ortman, 2018). *The New York Times* also reported that Xi and Lee had a low-profile meeting at Beidaihe resort in 2010 after Xi had learned he would be the successor of the next Chinese presidency (Wong and Ansfield, 2012). His interest in Singapore raised much hopes of major economic and political reforms, and it was widely reported that Xi's anti-corruption campaign was an emulation of Singapore's merit-based civil service system (Li, 2020). A political rationale for Xi's interest in the Singapore model is also that it is much more attractive to derive lessons from an Asian model rather than a Western model at the current state of developments. Acknowledging the Western development model led by the US is not desirable at the current state of US-China relations. Singapore and China have fundamentally different historical institutional legacies, but what matters is that China is on a pathway to change and modeled after the best of global practices, which at the current situation is provided by an Asian state (Lim and Horesh, 2016).

## THE CONTINUING SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

From this perspective, Singapore is in a unique position for the Chinese. Singapore is culturally and politically close enough, and at the same time geographically far away enough that China can comfortably reference its governance as a good model (Bolt, 1996). Singapore also shifted its foreign policy along with changing perceptions of China. There was less concerns with the political identification of its own ethnic-Chinese citizens with the mainland anymore by successfully managing the "Third China" image. More importantly, China was no longer interested in exporting its ideological revolutions and focus on economic development under Deng's open and reform program, which would be important to Singapore's economic standing in the future as well (To, 2001).



## Government-to-Government Projects

Singapore was hit by a recession in the mid-1980s which signaled a shift to an industrial export-oriented economic policy that attracted multinational firms to invest in Singapore to a path of “internationalization” (Rigg 1988). China was one of its destination for its economic potential and regional power status. In the process, Lee Kuan Yew believed that China and Singapore should have direct official joint projects. Deng Xiaoping was also anxious to develop the idea of implementing a modern industrial complex in China under the Singaporean blueprint to more effectively transfer the knowledge and technology. The official projects could then also overcome the shortcomings of the “Mayors’ Class” theoretical focus, in which the students could practically utilize what they have learned. Singapore’s economic and public administration experience would be transferred and replicated in various localities in China.

High-level councils in charge of the joint projects led by the deputy Prime Ministers of each countries, had also become platforms of regular meetings that facilitate mutual support between the two states (Fook, 2018). The government projects were mentioned in the 2009 issue of *China’s Foreign Affairs* in which the 10th meeting for the Suzhou Industrial Park and the 1st meeting for the Tianjin Eco-city were highlighted. The overall China-Singapore relations was evaluated to be friendly with remarkable achievements (Editorial Board, 2009). The positive notion carried over to the following year in which it mentioned the frequent exchanges of high level visits that led to greater mutual trust (Editorial Board, 2010). In the 2011 issue, it mentioned the 20th anniversary of its relations with Singapore and emphasized the rapidly developing economic and investment cooperation (Editorial Board 2011).

Three government to government projects are mentionable in regards to experience transfers. The first is the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park (hereafter SIP) that was initiated in February 1994. It is also known as “Singapore II” because of its sheer size of 288km squared which houses more than 10,000 enterprises (Curien, 2017). In the joint collaboration, Singaporean authorities made sure that the urban operation plans were strictly adhered to so that progress could be stable and efficient, and the Chinese authorities could learn the strict legal framework of the Singapore Model (Chia, 2011). The second official project was the Tianjin Eco-city initiated in September 2008, which aimed to develop an eco-friendly district with sustainable environmental practices. This project is overseen by the China-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city Administrative Committee with the plan to build a city that is 34.2km squared that can inhabit 350,000 people and hold 210,000 jobs (Curien, 2017). The third and most recent project was the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative (hereafter CCI) launched in November 2015. Its objective is to develop the lagging Western region of China and connect Chongqing and Singapore as key point hubs that stretch into the nine Chinese provinces and also outwards to Southeast Asia (Ping, 2018). In the Fourth China-Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Financial Summit it was revealed that the CCI, according to the Monetary Authority of Singapore, has helped generate USD 3 billion in multi-currency financing arrangements in the year 2021 despite the pandemic (MAS, 2021). In addition, the financial initiatives between the two states had become an active agent for the facilitation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### **Singapore's Role in the Belt and Road Initiative**

The Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter BRI) launched in 2013 is the paramount foreign policy of Xi Jinping, which carries the ambition of connecting infrastructural networks from Asia to Europe and Africa that stems from China. The initiative has two main pillars in its grand master plan; first the inland economic connection and second the maritime routes. The inland is to be connected with a webbed network of highways, railways, energy pipelines, with factories and internet connection laid out. China also plans to build fifty special economic zones (Chatzky and McBride, 2020) along the connection that would expand its economic and political influence in the Eurasian sphere. In the maritime connectivity plans, China aims to integrate Southeast Asia, India, the Arabian Peninsula, Europe, and parts of Africa through channels like the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, and the Indian Ocean.

Of the 146 countries that signed up to the BRI, Singapore was among the first to jump in the project (Wang, 2022). Also, Singapore was the largest foreign investment destination for China among BRI countries (Zhao, 2019). Singapore contributed 85 percent of total inbound investments from BRI countries in China (Shanmugam, 2017). The BRI is more focused on connecting the emerging economies in Asia, Eastern Africa, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. But since Singapore is already a developed economy with good infrastructure and a stable economy, it provides crucial services other developing nations cannot like financing solutions, legal and consulting services, and human resource training to help other countries manage the BRI projects (Fook, 2018). It is also an active supporter of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is a key financial platform for funding the infrastructure investments in the BRI. In other words, it is an active agent that helps China integrate other regions into the BRI rather than being a major recipient. To commemorate the good relations between the two nations, the Singapore Business Federation and China Enterprises Association commenced the BRI Connect Platform in August 2017 as a platform to share the latest developments of the BRI and promote active cooperation. The China-Singapore cooperation in the BRI is expected to undergo deeper relations with new dispute mediation frameworks as the bilateral relationship of the two states evolved from an “All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times” to an “All-Round High-Quality Future-Oriented Partnership” with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s state visit to Beijing this March (Li and Tu, 2023).

The intimate China-Singapore economic relations implies a very friendly bilateral relationship on the surface. Viewed in this perspective, we can say that China and Singapore has a very special relationship. With these positive developments, China had become Singapore’s largest trading partner in 2015, and Singapore had become China’s top foreign investor in 2013. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, China was Singapore’s number one destination for exports at USD 42.9 billion in 2020. For China, Singapore ranks thirteenth at USD 54 billion in exports (Simoes and Hidaglo, 2020).

## POLITICAL CHALLENGES IN CHINA-SINGAPORE RELATIONS

### Small State Politics and China's Rise

Putting economic relations to the side, does China and Singapore have a special relationship in terms of the political aspect? In this regard, one must not overlook the fact that Singapore's policy decisions arise out of simple geopolitical realities. Small states like Singapore are positioned with less room to maneuver relative to giants like China or the United States. To protect itself Singapore uses the strategy of hedging and other measures to reduce its vulnerability. Traditionally, Singapore's foreign policy is focused on expanding pragmatic diplomatic and economic ties, utilizing the support of international institutions and international law, and maintaining a neutral stance to ensure its own survival (Maninuzzaman, 1982). In line with this narrative, Singapore aims to integrate China into the ASEAN network and make it a stakeholder of the institution so as to keep China's rise in check (Medeiros et al., 2008). Singapore's hardline positioning against Russia with sanctions in the Ukraine War also gives insight to its foreign policy perspectives. At *prima facie* it seems the decision is motivated by its hedging strategy of expanding security ties with the United States, especially after the US-China conflict surged with the alleged Chinese spy balloon incident (Epstein and Woody, 2023). However, a stronger catalyst of this decision was that the Russian invasion threatened the very idea of sovereignty and territorial integrity, which potentially raises existential stakes for small states like Singapore that rely on international rules to survive (Tong, 2022).

The Singaporeans are relatively less alert about the 'China threat', but it still eyes its future course and behavior. Some perceive a gap between China's words and actions in its behavior which warns patterns of aggressive strong state politics. For example, many ASEAN states still clearly remember former Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi's 'China is a big country and you [ASEAN] are small countries' remark in the 2010 Hanoi ASEAN Regional Forum (Wang, 2018). China's aggressive foreign policy behavior impedes Singapore's national interests. It seemed like Singapore could benefit from both worlds, but with US-China tensions aggravating Chinese foreign policy behavior, it is making the China-Singapore relationship more awkward as Singapore adheres to its neutral balancing strategies. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong observes the precarious situation of the rising US-China rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. The US cannot replace China and vice versa, as they are highly integrated and interdependent in the international system, so "the world cannot afford the conflict." (Lee, 2020; Lee, 2023). Meanwhile, China perceives Singapore to be implementing an unbalanced strategy that builds mistrust, and Singapore's positioning with the US violates the neutral position it has emphasized (Chang, 2021). The relations the two states have cultivated with the Deng-Lee relations have started to fade away. And the three main flashpoints in China-Singapore tensions are being fanned by the escalating US-China rivalry.

### **Singapore's Indisputable US Security Ties**

The escalating US-China rivalry challenges China-Singapore relations because of Singapore's close security ties with the US. Singapore's diplomacy is driven by its national interests, even more so than other states due to its self-recognition that it is a tiny trading state. Its active diplomatic strategies are in part of not having to go through the intrusions of bigger states. However, in reality the analogy "when elephants fight, the grass suffers" has been used by Lee Kuan Yew himself to describe Singapore's situation.

Singapore was a strong supporter of the Obama administration's Asia rebalancing strategy and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made a speech regarding the Obama administration's critical role in Asian leadership and power balancing in a White House State Banquet in 2016 (Jiang, 2020). From Chinese perspectives, the usage of the word 'balancing' was a sword that was pointed towards their neck, a clear signal that Singapore was swinging over to the US. However, this was not the only time Singapore had gotten on China's nerves by using the word 'balancing'. In 2009, Lee Kuan Yew had spoken out loud in the US-ASEAN Business Council in Washington that America needs to fulfill its role as a balancer in the Asian region (Hon, 2009). The Chinese media highly criticized Lee's use of the word 'balancing', which was perceived by the Chinese as 'containment'. The hawkish attitudes emerged since 2008 after Chinese analysts and politicians sensed the shift of balance to their favor, and foreign analysts felt an aggressive tone that matched China's heightened economic capabilities, deepening its conflicts with other states including Singapore.

The nature of competition between the two giants became even more notorious with the emergence of the Donald Trump administration in 2017 up to the 2020 US presidential elections. The US-China rivalry had definitely impacted and contoured how the smaller states must act in a new international landscape, especially for states like Singapore that rely on the US for security and on China for economic benefits. The US enables Singapore to maintain its cutting edge military technology and an armed forces regarded to be the best in Southeast Asia (Tan, 2011). Singapore-US military ties stem from when Singapore seized the opportunity when the Philippines asked the US military to leave in the 1990s. Singapore had provided the Changi Naval Base for the US so that it could maintain a strategic military presence in Southeast Asia. The US military access to Singaporean facilities had been authorized by the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding. Frameworks for strategic cooperation were established with the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security and the 2015 Defense Cooperation Agreement.

In July 2017, there was the domestic controversy in Singapore between two former secretaries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding Singapore's policy towards China in the midst of rising US-China tensions. Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani who sparked the debate argued that Singapore should act like a middle power, and change its behavior significantly by conforming to China and becoming much more restrained when talking about other great powers (Mahbubani, 2017). Another Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan immediately criticized Mahbubani for suggesting such dangerous thoughts, and that Singapore had not survived by being anyone's "tame poodle" (Nur, 2017). Indeed, in 2016 Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

had also commenced in a speech on the National Day rally that Singapore had been able to defend itself as it could pack a punch above its weight by having its own consistent, independent position that gives it its reliable reputation. Lee also emphasized that this reputation should be held up so that it can keep its high-end position on the global stage (Lee, 2016). He went on to publicly speak positively of the US engagement in the Asian region at the 2023 Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan (Ruehl, 2023), a daring move that demonstrates Singapore's strict independent positioning.

As this debate demonstrates, in the geopolitical reality of having to maneuver itself for its national interest and survival, Singapore has relatively chosen to stick with its own pragmatic route in foreign affairs and had not attached much importance on the role of cultural affinity in diplomacy. The US plays a key role in maintaining a capable Singaporean Armed Forces to strengthen its own resilience, so Singapore will not be abandoning its US security ties any time soon. Even during the Trump administration, US-Singapore ties continued strong as the two states also conducted their first naval exercise outside of Singapore waters in 2017 (Kang and Choi) and Lee Hsien Loong agreed to extend its support to the US-led operation against the ISIS in 2018. In 2019, the two states signed the Protocol of Amendment to the 1990 MOU which extended the US presence in Singapore for another fifteen years (Lam, 2021).

However, with China's rising expectations of conformity for continued economic benefits and the US's formal security alliance Singapore currently enjoys, it is having less room to maneuver with its hedging strategy. In 2019, a few weeks after Singapore's renewed military facilities agreement with the United States, Singapore also signed an enhanced defense agreement known as the Agreement on Defense Exchanges and Security Cooperation (ADESC) with China. It broadened its initial basic aspects of exchanges and exercises to a visiting forces agreement, a bilateral hotline, and a regular defense ministers' dialogue from the first agreement in 2008 (Parameswaran, 2019). In the August of 2022, Singapore participated in an expanded US-led naval military drill Super Garuda Shield with Indonesia, Australia and Japan. Then, in a response of sorts, China and Singapore conducted a naval drill in May 2023, expanding the scope by deploying missile-bearing and mine-hunting vessels since their first joint exercise in the South China Sea in 2021 (Strangio, 2023). China has made a firm stance that it will enhance its security stance with its Asian neighbors, and Singapore is consistently optimizing its approaches and taking diplomatic steps to adjust to the new international circumstances. In this situation, Singapore as the smaller state has to continuously recalibrate its foreign policy options where unforeseen obstacles will continue to emerge, and it is making strenuous effort between the US and China to maintain its rights to navigate regional waters. For this reason, the relationship between China and Singapore does not have a stable relationship anymore.

### **The South China Sea and Singapore's Position**

Singapore's firm support for the South China Seas arbitration has put China Singapore relations to a low point. Singapore is not a claimant state in the maritime disputes in the South China Seas. However, it is an active supporter of upholding international law and code of conduct in diplomatic relations and dispute settlements. Singapore is a small

state, and it has to rely on international rules to protect itself since it lacks sufficient strength (Huang, 2019). Therefore, Singapore has long opposed Chinese intervention in the South China Seas. Another reason this case is especially important for Singapore is that for its global hubs to flourish, it needs open access to sea lanes and air space in the region. If China solidifies its control over the South China Sea, Singapore's economic fate would be put under China's pressures (Chong, 2017). On the other hand, China sees issues with Singapore since it was also the coordinator of ASEAN's relations with China at the time, and that impedes Singapore's ability to be "fair and honest" as the coordinating country. Singapore has gone against China's claimed territorial rights with the clause of a "rules based international order" proclaimed by the US, which has deeply disappointed China (Zhang, 2017). No longer was China-Singapore relations evaluated as 'friendly' but only as making 'steady progress' in 2016 according to the 2017 edition of *China's Foreign Affairs*, with robust clarification on its position on the South China Sea issue (Editorial Board, 2017).

In April 2016, Singapore raised its voice when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that China had secured a four-point consensus on the South China Sea disputes with Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos. Two senior Singapore diplomats accused China for intruding in internal ASEAN affairs, and even attempting to divide ASEAN. Although China responded that it was a misunderstanding, the friction led to a no-show of the Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan in a press conference with Wang that was to follow the Yunnan ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers Meeting (Zhang, 2017). Lee Hsien Loong emphasized on the 2016 National Day Rally that Singapore must stand by its principles of upholding international law, maintaining freedom of navigation, and promoting a united ASEAN when dealing with the South China Seas issue (Liang, 2016). In response, the Chinese foreign ministry stated that China hopes Singapore will maintain a fair position for a stable China-Singapore and China-ASEAN ties. Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin went further and warned that since Singapore is not a claimant in the South China Sea, the Singaporean government should not interfere and focus on promoting China-ASEAN ties (Tan, 2016).

While Singapore's rhetoric strictly adheres to its own principles in appropriate times, its actions normally show that it does not want to provoke China unnecessarily. Singapore carefully approaches the US freedom of navigations operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea. Singapore Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen commented that although the US has rights to protect its interests, it would not be good for the region if incidents at the South China Sea occurs (Chong, 2015). Furthermore in 2020, Lee Hsien Loong called for a "stable and predictable" US approach to Asia, stressing that Singapore wants to maintain good relations with China and deep relations with the US (Long, 2020). Singapore heavily depends on the relationship of the two giants for its trade and security, and to maintain the benefits Singapore must embark on many difficult tasks of actively facilitating dialogue while sacrificing its actions. As a result, with its weakening commitment towards FONOPs, Singapore may seem to give up on its rhetoric as well. This does not signify Singapore's bandwagoning towards China, but it does create new space for complications with the US, and anticipations for major headaches among the Singaporean leadership.



## **Singapore's Connection with Taiwan**

Lee Kuan Yew had personal ties with every President of the Republic of China (ROC) since Chiang Kai-shek to Ma Ying-jeou and also made many visits to the ROC. The visits of the two state leaders have been covered to be personal trips, but much political matters were discussed that would be the start of many cooperative programs. Lee demonstrated his role as a middleman between Beijing and Taipei. In one instance, he facilitated the meeting of Chinese and Taiwanese representatives in Singapore in 1992 that led to consecutive rounds of negotiations regarding the cross-strait issues (Lin, 1993). Even after Lee stepped down from the Prime Minister position, top leaders of Singapore and the ROC continued to visit each other (Chang and Tai, 1996). Representative offices were also established between the two states. In 1969, the "Republic of China Trade Mission in Singapore" was established, and in 1979 the "Trade Representative Office in Taipei" was established in Taiwan. But because of Singapore's adherence to the PRC's "One China Principle" in 1990, the names of these offices were changed to "Taipei Trade Representative Office in Singapore" and "Singapore Trade Office in Taipei", respectively.

Singapore had also sought military cooperation from the ROC, which stemmed from its small size and the necessity of reaching out to external forces to enhance its defense capabilities. The ROC supported Singapore in training Singaporean soldiers on Taiwan's military bases, conducting joint exercises, and also supplying military equipment (Chong, 2022). Generalissimo Chiang Ching-kuo and Lee Kuan Yew elevated the military relations by signing the 'Project Starlight', in which Singapore sent its troops to train in Taiwan on a yearly basis (Chen, 2021). With much mutual understanding, the two states continued to develop active economic cooperation beginning in the 1980s, and by the 1990s trade and investment was also a dominant factor in the bilateral relations.

However, China surprised the Singaporeans when it suddenly objected strongly to then Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to Taiwan in 2004 with a one-year freeze of official engagement. Furthermore, the Chinese Foreign Ministry escalated the rhetoric by saying that the trip had damaged China-Singaporean relations and also canceling bilateral meetings. Only after Lee had assumed the role of Prime Minister and paid a high profile visit to China had the situation been diffused. China had now made it clear that they would no longer tolerate impingements regarding China's core interest, especially if it concerns Taiwan. With the addition of the Singaporean business community lobbying the government to not provoke the PRC, high-level Singaporean officials have not traveled to Taiwan since the 2004 incident (Medeiros, 2008).

But Singapore had once again got on China's nerves with the Taiwan issue in 2016. In November of that year, China seized nine armored infantry transport vehicles that was on its way back to Singapore via the Hong Kong Kwai Yung Container Terminal from an exercise that was held in Taiwan. Singaporean Secretary of Defense Ng Eng Hen contested that the seized vehicles were the property of the Singapore Armed Forces under the protection of International Law. However, on the same day the Chinese Foreign Ministry retorted that Singapore's military exchanges with Taiwan violates the "One China Principle" it should adhere to and the seizure is under Hong Kong

government laws. After all those years of allowing Singapore's military ties with Taiwan, the unexpected actions of China reveals its displeasure with Singapore's actions that go against its core national interests (Jaipragas and Wong, 2017).

Especially since in 2016 with the South China Seas issue, the succeeding Taiwan issue added fuel to the Chinese anger. To solidify the evidence of the downturn of China-Singapore relations, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was left out of the May 2017 Belt and Road Summit despite its explicit support for the project since its inception (Han, 2017). However, that did not halt Singapore and Taiwan from conducting Project Starlight later that same year (Jennings, 2017). Singapore continues to attempt to balance China with its relationship with Taiwan. In 2019, Singapore signed the "National Defense Exchange and Security Cooperation Agreement" and was implemented in 2021 after a pause during the pandemic (Wang, 2021). Singapore favors a Taiwan that is not under PRC control, but still cautions the pro-independence DPP to not make any moves or declaration toward independence for it would create political instability (Scott, 2022). When US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made her groundbreaking visit to Taiwan as the highest ranking US official in twenty-five years, former Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan condemned the act as agitating the region, and that there are "more intelligent ways" to support Taiwan (Tan, 2022). Singapore favors a status-quo relationship with Taiwan, in which it can balance the mainland with a relatively autonomous ROC government. However, Singapore had much to lose when the US stimulated Taiwanese independence and angered China at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

After the unfortunate downturn of China-Singapore relations after a series of events, there resumed efforts to recover the relationship. In February 2017, the high-level Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation that oversees the three inter-governmental projects were resumed after being postponed in 2016. In that year September, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong paid a visit to China to meet President Xi Jinping which led to a rapid recovery of the bilateral relations just before the important CCP 19th Party Congress was held (Fook, 2018). China and Singapore signed the *MOU on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* in the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Despite the efforts from the Singaporean side, however, the 'friendly' relationship tag was not recovered in 2017 according to the 2018 issue of *China's Foreign Affairs* (Editorial Board, 2018). Holistically viewing, China-Singapore relations is motivated more by pragmatic economic benefits and the side that has more to lose takes action. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong paid an official visit to meet President Xi Jinping in Beijing on 31 March, 2023, which was his first since the COVID19 pandemic. The occasion is also important because the event held place after the unprecedented third term inauguration of Xi as the General Secretary of the CCP. Lee expressed confidence in the Chinese economy and the future of the BRI in an effort to deepen Singapore's cooperation with China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023; Prime Minister's Office, 2023).

As this relationship's honeymoon phase faded, it became clearer that the Singapore

Model was not a viable model for the Chinese in the first place. The sheer difference of the economy of scale between the two states limits China's ability to implement what the city-state of 5 million people can effectively do. For example, the Singapore corruption deterrence strategy is to compensate politicians with a high salary. The state of Singapore has almost the same governance size as a major city in China. So, a Chinese city has the problem of having to take into account the other areas before implementing its own rules. The Singapore Model may also be overtly exaggerated by Chinese leadership to make an argument for reforms (Ortmann and Thompson, 2018). And there is the blatant assumption that Singapore demonstrates a good model just because it is influenced by Confucian culture while there is not enough evidence that culture or education affects overall governance or economic development. For the post socialist conservative reformers the Singapore model was a safe pathway for the economic management under "one-party rule" and the confirmation that liberal democracy is not fundamentally compatible with Asian cultures. Therefore, the current rhetoric of China's praise of the Singapore model can be interpreted as a justification method for China's developmental path at best. This gives less incentive to China to keep a favorable relationship with Singapore at the expense of their hospitality.

The readjustments of Singapore's attitude stems from the geopolitical reality that it just cannot dismiss China. From Chinese perspectives, the goal of its initial relationship with Singapore was to take advantage of Singaporean capital and also expand its companies into Southeast Asia. At the same time, the similar political practices was a perk that the Chinese could exploit for its modernization programs. Furthermore, the inter-governmental projects were established on the basis of knowledge transfer in effective governance and economic benefits for both ends. But now, China has the upper hand since it has economic instruments to coerce Singapore to conform to its own tastes. Especially as Singapore hopes to speed up the establishment of the "Southward Trade Corridor" in the BRI that will boost the maritime trade competency of Singapore. China has already demonstrated its capabilities to Singapore by threatening to leave Singapore out of the BRI and instead heavily invest in Malaysia for the Southern port access. Most importantly, the changing international landscape amidst the US-China rivalry has changed the circumstances for small states like Singapore. As the Singaporeans are given less room to maneuver in the changing landscape, it will make pragmatic decisions that could hurt its relationship with China. In general, the opinion of the Singaporean high officials are skeptical and lacking in trust of the Chinese (Lam, 2021), which may set a gloomy forecast for the China-Singapore relationship.

The continuation of China-Singapore relations then can be summed up to a strategic economic cooperation that is susceptible to political tension like all other bilateral relationships China has with other states. The familiarity in politics is not a significant binder of China-Singapore relations, and the economic pragmatism is what holds the two together. But one must not overstate the role of economic ties as a binder of state relations. Political friction erodes however cordial economic relations as it can be seen in Figure 1 when trade plummeted in 2016 with the Hong Kong infantry transport vehicle confiscation incident. The economic downturn is also reflected in the portfolio of the Singaporean state-owned investment company Temasek. Figure 2 roughly shows that the share of investment in China has gradually decreased while it increased in the

**Table 1.** Time Table of China-Singapore Bilateral Relationship

Period	China's Foreign Policy	Singapore's Foreign Policy	China-Singapore Relations
1965	Ideological affinity, shared anti-imperialist sentiments, potential economic cooperation	Gained full independence, threats of regional communist insurgencies	Limited engagement and economic cooperation
1970s-1980s	Deterioration of relations with USSR and détente with US opens China to international system	Efforts to not be seen as a "third China" in ASEAN politics, limited but pragmatic engagement with China	Increasing trade relations despite lack of official diplomatic relations
1980s-1990s	Shift towards economic development and opening up to the world	Pragmatic approach to economic development, seeking foreign investments and markets	Singapore's economic success and efficient governance model attract Chinese leaders, start of government-to-government projects and "Mayor's Class" Official diplomatic relations in 1990
2000s	Rise as an economic power, increasing assertiveness	Strengthening economic ties, serving as investor and financial hub for Chinese companies	Strengthening economic ties with initiation of second and third government-to-government projects
2010s	Belt and Road Initiative provides opportunities for economic cooperation	South China Sea disputes strain relations, advocacy for peaceful resolution and upholding international law	Singapore among the first to sign up to BRI. Downturn in relations with temporary strain, efforts to recover relationship, signing of MOU on Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road
Late 2010s-2020s	China's rise and growing power asymmetry escalates US-China rivalry that affects bilateral relationship	Singapore adopts pragmatic approach detached from cultural affinity or historical ties between US and China	Strategic economic cooperation susceptible to political tensions, limitations in maximizing national interests, Chinese interception of military vehicle used in Singapore-Taiwan joint exercise brings bilateral relationship to a new low point
2023 and future prospects	Pursuit of political capital, rational pragmatic moves	Continued balancing between US security and Chinese economic benefits	Strategic economic cooperation, potential differences and challenges that further limits Singapore's strategies

Americas, and the investment portfolios show Singapore is more geared towards US and European companies.

Although China and Singapore continues its ties with the emphasis on pragmatism,

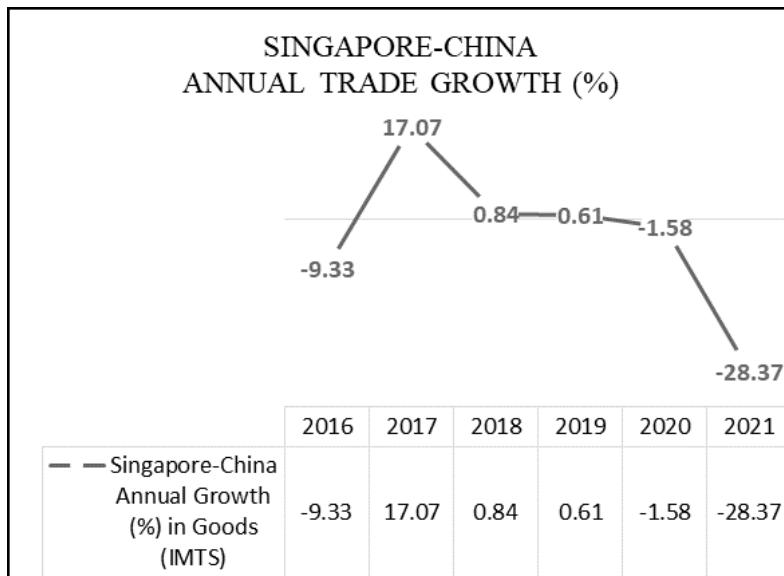


Figure 1. Singapore-China Trade Annual Growth (source: ASEAN Stats Data Portal)



Figure 2. Investment Distribution of Temasek by Geography in percentage (source: Temasek)

the definition is different. As Ho (2018) analyzes, the Singaporean approach to pragmatism is solving problems while the Chinese approach to pragmatism is a means of acquiring political capital. So when China's foreign policy is being conducted at a position of strength and power, it may assert the differences between the two countries more clearly in the coming future. In other words, the pragmatism that bound the two states together may be pragmatically abandoned for the acquirement of capital and a higher global standing by China. And this is a reality as China flexed its political muscles on Singapore in recent years when it went against China's national interests.

Already China's rise and growing asymmetry of power has put Singapore at a disadvantage in regards to economic relations and partnerships. But China will only become more aggressive towards Singapore to conform to its national interests with the escalating US-China rivalry (Choong, 2021). China's rise has withered the Singapore

Model, and the US-China rivalry changed the international landscape which gives Singapore much less viable options to maximize its own national interests. And as Singapore firmly makes rational pragmatic moves unattached to cultural affinity or historical ties, China has become the model for pragmatic development. Ironically, it was pragmatism that brought these two states close together, it is now what is pushing these two away from each other. No matter how much China has been in a 'fever' with a Singaporean fantasy, it does not mean it still lives in that dream. Both China and Singapore has had their wake up call, no dreamy relationship lasts forever.

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