Historical ties and diplomatic relations

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From the Nanyang to the Cold War

The Chinese presence in Singapore is older than the modern state. Part A of this book described the junk trade from Amoy, Canton and the Teochew ports, the dialect communities and the kongsi, while Part B followed the remittance houses and the Chinese banks that collected the savings of migrants and sent them home. Until the Second World War, the relationship between Singapore and China was therefore a relationship between a diaspora and its homeland, mediated by families, clans and remittances. The Bank of China opened a branch in Singapore in 1936, which gave the Nationalist government a direct channel to the savings of the Nanyang Chinese.[1]

After 1949 the relationship became political. The Cold War, the communist insurgency in Malaya and the fear that the People's Republic would use the overseas Chinese as a fifth column made the governments of Malaya and Singapore cautious. Chapter II of Part C recorded that the Malaysian federal government ordered the Singapore branch of the Bank of China to close in 1965 and that the branch survived

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only because Singapore left the federation before the order took effect.[2] The episode set a pattern that lasted for decades: trade with China was welcome, while political influence was not.

The new state also had to demonstrate that it was not a Chinese state. With a population that was about three-quarters Chinese, Singapore was watched by its neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, for any sign that the island might become a "Third China". When Lee Kuan Yew began his official visits to China in 1976, he conducted them in English to make clear that he represented Singapore.[3] Singapore also maintained close relations with Taiwan. Its armed forces have trained there under an arrangement dating from 1975, known publicly through the exercises called Starlight.[4]

Deng Xiaoping's visit of 1978

The turning point came in November 1978, when Deng Xiaoping paid his first and only official visit to Singapore. According to the marker that the National Heritage Board unveiled in 2010, he was impressed by what he saw and showed a particular interest in the benefits that foreign investment had brought to the island. A month later, at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, he launched the policies of economic reform and opening to the world.[5]

Lee used the visit to argue that the Chinese of Singapore, descendants of poor migrants from southern China, had prospered under the right policies and that China itself could do better. He also urged Deng to stop exporting communist revolution to Southeast Asia, advice that China later followed.[6] During his Southern Tour of 1992, Deng praised the good social order and management of Singapore. Many Chinese officials were subsequently sent to the island for training.[7] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore has since put the number of Chinese officials who made study visits or attended training programmes in Singapore since the mid-1990s at more than 50,000.[8]

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Trade offices, recognition and the partnership

Formal ties followed in stages. The two states exchanged trade offices in September 1981. Commercial air services began in 1985. China appointed Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's former Minister for Finance, as an adviser on its special economic zones.[9] Diplomatic relations were established only on 3 October 1990. Singapore had waited until Indonesia restored its own relations with Beijing, which made it the last state in Southeast Asia to recognise the People's Republic.[10]

Since then, the relationship has been managed through an unusually dense set of institutions. The Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation is co-chaired by a Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore and a Vice Premier of China.[11] The Chinese government describes it as the highest-level mechanism for coordinating cooperation between the two states.[12] Below it, eight business councils link Singapore with the provinces and municipalities of Sichuan, Shandong, Liaoning, Zhejiang, Tianjin, Guangdong, Jiangsu and Shanghai.[13] At the end of an official visit by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to China, the two governments agreed on 1 April 2023 to upgrade their relations to an "All Round High Quality Future Oriented Partnership".[14]

Friction and balance

The relationship has not been free of friction. In November 2016 Hong Kong customs seized nine Terrex armoured vehicles of the Singapore Army that were being shipped home from exercises in Taiwan. Only on 24 January 2017 did Hong Kong customs announce that the vehicles would be returned.[15] The seizure was widely read as a signal of Chinese displeasure with Singapore's stance on the South China Sea and its military ties with Taiwan. Singapore's response was characteristic: a measured statement, quiet diplomacy and no change in its policy of maintaining good relations with all the great powers.

That policy of balance, which Chapter IV of Part F describes and Chapter V of Part K examines in the context of the rivalry between the United States and China, frames everything that follows. Singapore is a close security partner of the United

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States and the largest foreign investor in China. Its financial centre serves Chinese clients while applying rules that are largely shaped by Western standard-setters. The commercial value of that position depends on Singapore's ability to keep the confidence of both sides.

Notes

1. Bank of China Singapore Branch, “About us – History” (boc.cn/sg): the branch began operations in Cecil Street in 1936; see Chapter III of Part B. ↩
2. See Chapter II of Part C, citing Lee Kuan Yew's press conference of 9 August 1965: “China wants to trade with us, I mean we let the Bank of China go on.”. ↩
3. Wikipedia, “Lee Kuan Yew” (accessed November 2026), section on China: Lee's official visits to China from 1976 were conducted in English to show that he represented Singapore and not a “Third China”; Wikipedia, “China–Singapore relations” (accessed November 2026): ethnic Chinese make up roughly 70 to 75 per cent of Singaporeans. ↩
4. Wikipedia, “China–Singapore relations” (accessed November 2026): Singapore's military training and facilities agreement with Taiwan dates from 1975; the annual exercises are known as Exercise Starlight. ↩
5. National Heritage Board, “Factsheet on the Deng Xiaoping Marker”, 14 November 2010 (nas.gov.sg), Annex 2: “In November 1978, Deng paid his first and only official visit to Singapore. He was impressed with what he saw and showed a particular interest in the benefits of foreign investments for Singapore”; the dual policies of reform and openness were initiated at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978. The November 1978 visit is confirmed by Wikipedia, “Lee Kuan Yew” (accessed November 2026). ↩
6. Wikipedia, “Lee Kuan Yew” (accessed November 2026), section on China: Deng visited Singapore and met Lee in November 1978; Lee urged Deng to

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stop exporting communist ideology to Southeast Asia, and Deng later followed this advice. ↩

7. National Heritage Board, "Factsheet on the Deng Xiaoping Marker", 14 November 2010, Annex 2: "Following Deng's famous Southern Tour in 1992, when he commented on Singapore's good social order and management, many Chinese officials were sent to Singapore for training.". ↩
8. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, country page "People's Republic of China" (mfa.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): more than 50,000 Chinese officials have made study visits or attended training programmes in Singapore since the mid-1990s. ↩
9. Wikipedia, "China–Singapore relations" (accessed November 2026): exchange of trade offices in September 1981; Wikipedia, "Lee Kuan Yew" (accessed November 2026), section on China: commercial air services from 1985; Goh Keng Swee appointed adviser on Special Economic Zones. ↩
10. Wikipedia, "China–Singapore relations" (accessed November 2026): Singapore preferred its neighbours, "particularly Indonesia", to normalise relations with the PRC first; Indonesia and the PRC announced their decision to establish ties on 8 August 1990; formal diplomatic relations established on 3 October 1990, making Singapore "the last Southeast Asian country to officially recognise the PRC". ↩
11. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, country page "People's Republic of China" (mfa.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): the 14th JCBC co-chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and Vice Premier Han Zheng (September 2018), the 15th by Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Vice Premier Han Zheng (October 2019). ↩
12. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, report on the senior officials' meeting of the China-Singapore Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation, Beijing, 18 October 2024 (mfa.gov.cn): the JCBC is "the highest-level mechanism for coordinating bilateral cooperation in various fields". ↩

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13. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, country page “People's Republic of China” (accessed November 2026): eight provincial business and economic councils with Sichuan, Shandong, Liaoning, Zhejiang, Tianjin, Guangdong, Jiangsu and Shanghai. ↩
14. Prime Minister's Office, “Joint Announcement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Singapore”, press release, 1 April 2023 (pmo.gov.sg): official visit from 27 March to 1 April 2023; “Both sides have agreed to upgrade bilateral relations to an ‘All Round High Quality Future Oriented Partnership’”. ↩
15. Wikipedia, “China–Singapore relations” (accessed November 2026): nine Terrex vehicles and associated equipment seized in November 2016; on 24 January 2017 Hong Kong Customs announced that they would be returned to Singapore; American President Lines later fined HK$90,000. ↩

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