



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

**ISEAS**  
YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# MANAGING CHINA- SINGAPORE RELATIONS AMID US-CHINA RIVALRY

Ma Bo

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# **Managing China-Singapore Relations Amid US-China Rivalry**

By Ma Bo

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Amid China-US geopolitical competition in the Asia-Pacific, it is imperative for both China and Singapore to adapt and respond to evolving circumstances for mutual benefit.
- The enduring trust and solid foundation between China and Singapore in economic and trade cooperation are validated through their active involvement in each other's initiatives. This proved true even when the recent COVID-19 pandemic strained political interactions.
- The political-security dimensions of the relationship between China and Singapore are complex and constantly evolving, influenced as they are by factors such as Singapore's military training in Taiwan, the contentious South China Sea disputes, and US foreign policy in the region.
- However, Singapore's longstanding hedging strategy between the two superpowers may face increasingly severe tests as China-US rivalry escalates.
- If carefully managed, Singapore's successful track record of facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties can continue to make it a valuable player in easing tensions between China and the US.





# Managing China-Singapore Relations Amid US-China Rivalry

By Ma Bo<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

China-Singapore relations have come a long way since diplomatic ties were established in 1990. At that time, China needed friends and foreign investments, and Singapore played a role in befriendng Beijing and bringing in investments from abroad. The West had then ostracized Beijing due to the 1989 Tiananmen incident. Today, a much stronger China faces a somewhat similar hostile external environment. Most notable is the escalating tensions between China and the United States, which has created a unique geopolitical context that necessitates a careful examination of the future trajectory of China-Singapore ties. As both nations navigate this complex geopolitical environment, they must adapt and respond to evolving circumstances so that they can continue to reap mutual benefits.

The strong and dynamic economic relationship between China and Singapore is well-known. This article will delve into the political-security dimensions of their bilateral ties by examining three issues, i.e., the South China Sea issue, Singapore's relationship with the US, and the Taiwan issue. The paper argues that Singapore's position on these three issues will need to be adjusted as China grows more powerful, and given the intensifying China-US competition in Asia. Such an adjustment will help ensure that China-Singapore ties have ample room to grow and

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Ma Bo was a Wang Gungwu Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. He is Associate Professor at the School of International Studies and the Assistant Director of the Collaborative Innovation Center of South China Sea Studies at Nanjing University, China. The author wishes to extend his gratitude to Mr Hou Lexuan, an MA student of the School of International Studies at Nanjing University, whose diligent research efforts were indispensable to the completion of this article.

flourish. The article will first trace how Chinese narratives on Singapore have evolved over the years and how these will continue to be shaped by Singapore's stand on the above three issues.

## **NARRATIVES ON SINGAPORE'S ROLE IN CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT**

The resilience of China-Singapore ties has been consistently demonstrated over the past few years, even when the COVID-19 pandemic strained political and economic interactions. Zhai Kun, a distinguished scholar in international relations at Peking University, notes that amongst all Southeast Asian nations, Singapore has been deeply involved in China's reform and opening-up journey,<sup>2</sup> and the city-state shares very close alignment with Chinese interests. This viewpoint primarily underscores the strong foundation for cooperation between China and Singapore in the economic arena, such as in trade, finance and technological exchanges. Singapore's standing as the world's largest offshore trading centre for renminbi (RMB) and a Southeast Asian nexus for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reinforce this congruence of interests.

Viewed through the lens of economic and trade collaboration, China is Singapore's prime trading partner, export market, and the most substantial source of imports. China and Singapore's economic and trade interaction has a deep and robust foundation, and exhibits a high degree of interdependence. From an investment standpoint, Singapore topped the list of destination countries for non-financial direct investment by Chinese companies among the BRI countries in 2022. Concurrently, Singapore also serves as a crucial source of foreign investment for China. As of 2022, Singapore's cumulative investment in China reached US\$72.3 billion, and the country has remained China's largest source of foreign investment for nine successive years, since 2013.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 翟崑, “互信互利、惠及世界: 李显龙访华推动中新合作关系迈入新阶段”, *中国网*, 2023年4月3日, [http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2023-04/04/content\\_85210313.shtml](http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2023-04/04/content_85210313.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> 周东洋, “中新伙伴关系更上一层楼”, *中国贸易报*, 2023年4月4日, <https://www.chinatradenews.com.cn/content/202304/04/c150308.html>

The enduring trust and solid foundation between China and Singapore in economic and trade cooperation are further validated through their active involvement in each other's initiatives. Singapore, as a founding member of the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), and China, having applied to join the DEPA in 2021, yield considerable potential for bilateral collaboration in the digital economy. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described DEPA as a "free trade agreement for the digital age" and expressed Singapore's support for China's interest in joining. Concurrently, Singapore embraces and actively participates in China's BRI. Capitalizing on its inherent strengths, Singapore has positioned itself as a crucial hub in Southeast Asia for the BRI. Prime Minister Lee enumerated three primary strengths for its success on that front. Firstly, Singapore's highly developed financial infrastructure offers financing and assessment platforms for numerous projects; it also ranks among the largest offshore centres for RMB transactions globally. Secondly, regarding its legal attributes, Singapore hosts a multitude of international law firms capable of providing arbitration and mediation services for the BRI. Lastly, many multinational corporations have established their headquarters in Singapore to oversee their regional financial, human resources, and operational matters, fulfilling a "control tower" function.<sup>4</sup>

A signature event demonstrating the China-Singapore progressive relationship was the week-long trip to China by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong from late March to early April 2023. From China's perspective, Prime Minister Lee was one of the few foreign leaders to be received by the newly inaugurated Chinese government, marking an important phase in bilateral relations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "高端访谈：专访新加坡总理李显龙", 央视网, 2023年3月25日, <https://tv.cctv.com/2023/03/25/VIDEzOMrkzB1IKRX1ioE9AiI230325.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> Ma Bo, "Lee's China Visit Highlights ASEAN Countries' Concern of Worsening Regional Security Situation", *Global Times*, 28 March 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1288122.shtml>

The visit has borne significant economic fruit. The two sides inked seven Memoranda of Understanding, underscoring their shared pledge to bolster comprehensive and innovative collaboration in trade and investment, green and digital economy, food security, and finance.<sup>6</sup> Singapore sought to capitalize on the opportunities following China's easing of its pandemic prevention measures to fuel its own economic growth.<sup>7</sup> The upgrading of the China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement is clear evidence of the deepening economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. In addition, Premier Li Qiang and Prime Minister Lee jointly witnessed the signing of bilateral cooperation agreements in various fields, such as culture, technology and judiciary.

A key highlight during the trip was the shared consensus between Prime Minister Lee and Chinese President Xi Jinping to elevate the China-Singapore relationship into an "All-Rounded, High-Quality, Future-Oriented" Partnership.<sup>8</sup> This proclamation embodies their collective foresight and pragmatic strategy. On the political front, China aspires for Singapore to become a key geo-economic partner in Southeast Asia, gradually synchronizing with China's expanding geopolitical reach in the Asia Pacific. Economically, China perceives Singapore as a vital mediator bridging the East and the West in high-tech industries, notably in the semiconductor and telecommunications sectors, which have been ensnared in a "tech war" initiated by the West and led by the US. The "Future-Oriented" component of the partnership mirrors Beijing's strategic long-term approach to nurture a sustainable China-Singapore

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<sup>6</sup> 吴俊刚, "亚洲国家需稳把舵齐鼓桨", *联合早报*, 2023年4月5日, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/forum/views/story20230405-1379608>

<sup>7</sup> 翟崑, "互信互利、惠及世界: 李显龙访华推动中新合作关系迈入新阶段", *中国网*, 2023年4月3日, [http://www.china.com.cn/opinion/2020/2023-04/04/content\\_85210313.shtml](http://www.china.com.cn/opinion/2020/2023-04/04/content_85210313.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> "Joint Announcement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Singapore on the establishment of an All-Round High-Quality Future-Oriented Partnership", Prime Minister's Office, 1 April 2023, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/Joint-Announcement-China-and-Singapore-all-round-high-quality-future-oriented-partnership-Apr-2023>

relationship grounded on the belief in the ascension of the East and the relative decline of the West. Beijing acknowledges that Singapore's security cooperation with the US is expected to remain solid in the foreseeable future, yet it demonstrates preparedness to progressively nurture bilateral security ties with Singapore and other ASEAN nations.

Nevertheless, despite this “golden era” of bilateral relations, scholarly interest in Singapore within China appears to have waned in recent years. For example, from 2013 to 2022, the number of articles dedicated to Singapore published in *Southeast Asian Studies*, a premier Chinese journal on Southeast Asian international relations, has demonstrated an overall decline.<sup>9</sup> There was a slight uptick in 2016, attributed to the relatively tense period in China-Singapore relations over the South China Sea.<sup>10</sup> However, this momentum did not continue. Some contend that the stability of China-Singapore relations and the absence of noteworthy new themes are to blame, implying that the enduring political trust and economic collaboration between the two countries have resulted in a stable bilateral relationship and cultivated a mature and well-entrenched mechanism for dialogue and cooperation.

Conversely, some suggest that Chinese scholars no longer perceive Singapore as “special”, increasingly considering it as merely another Southeast Asian nation.<sup>11</sup> To comprehend this shift, it is critical to discern why Chinese scholars had previously deemed Singapore “unique” to Beijing. Singapore is the only sovereign state worldwide with a predominantly Chinese population. Historically, although Singapore's interests may not always perfectly align with China's, the Chinese community in Singapore and their affinity for Chinese culture have acted as internal catalysts for developing China-Singapore relations. This

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<sup>9</sup> 朱文龙, “区域国别研究的名与实: 基于2013—2022年CSSCI期刊新加坡国别研究文献的考察”, *东南亚纵横* .06(2022): 40–48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Felix K. Chang, “The Odd Couple: Singapore's Relations with China”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/12/the-odd-couple-singapores-relations-with-china/>

cultural-identity foundation allows both nations to discover more shared interests in regional cooperation, and propels collaboration in sectors such as economy and education.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Chinese scholars assert that during the nascent stages of China's reform and opening up, Singapore adopted a practical, benefits-focused cooperative approach in developing its economic and trade relations with China, setting it apart from other nations. This distinct philosophy of collaboration has significantly and unequivocally contributed to China's economic success. Singapore's unique governance model as a "global city" with a "strong and efficient" government has considerably influenced China. Singapore engages closely with various provinces and cities in China at subnational levels, such as in the Sino-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park, the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City, and the Sino-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City. These joint ventures have significantly impacted China's economic and social development, with numerous Chinese cities emulating and learning from Singapore's development and governance model.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, as China's influence continues to grow, the unique value proposition of Singapore for Beijing is unquestionably waning.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, most Chinese scholars scrutinizing Singapore's current foreign policy agree that Singapore operates based on its national interests and unique rationale, and not based on its language and cultural affinities with China.<sup>15</sup> Three elements are commonly identified in understanding Singapore's foreign policy: survival instincts, the maximization of

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<sup>12</sup> 赵儒南,“新地区主义视角下的中国与新加坡合作模式研究.” *世界经济与政治论坛*.03(2020): 67–94.

<sup>13</sup> 范磊,“新加坡发展与中国关系的理性逻辑和双重面向”, *当代世界社会主义问题*.01 (2021): 158–67.

<sup>14</sup> Felix K. Chang, “The Odd Couple: Singapore's Relations with China”.

<sup>15</sup> 范磊,“新加坡发展与中国关系的理性逻辑和双重面向”; 王琛.”小国的自我认知与外交行为:冷战后新加坡外交的演变与新挑战.” *太平洋学报* 29.02 (2021): 43–57; 陈世凤.”应对大国崛起:新加坡对华对冲战略评析.” *外交评论(外交学院学报)* 35.03 (2018): 63–101.

national interests, and a delicate balancing act between the major powers. In its relations with China, Singapore consistently prioritizes national security, geopolitics, national interests, and enhancing its international standing as foundations on which to develop its ties with China.<sup>16</sup>

The geopolitical vulnerability of Singapore profoundly affects its policy towards China.<sup>17</sup> Several scholars highlight that as a small nation, Singapore has inherent vulnerabilities that influence its foreign policy decisions.<sup>18</sup> The geopolitical milieu and intricate structural network in the Asia-Pacific region further exacerbate Singapore's vulnerability; it is caught up in the rivalry among major powers while it stands encircled by Indonesia and Malaysia. Furthermore, Singapore's strategic location at the crucial chokepoint of the Malacca Strait, which carries considerable military and economic importance, imbues it with a heightened sense of vulnerability compared to the average small nation.

Moreover, East Asia has engendered a convoluted network of interdependence characterized by frequent trade and human exchanges among regional countries.<sup>19</sup> This reality heightens Singapore's sensitivity and vulnerability. This motivates it to adopt pragmatic foreign policies to mitigate risks caused by interdependence.<sup>20</sup> Its dedication to preserving national security, autonomy, and a balancing role between major powers remains unwavering. Further, Singapore is resolute in its aim to avoid being perceived as a vassal state of China.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 范磊, “新加坡发展与中国关系的理性逻辑和双重面向”。

<sup>17</sup> 王琛, “小国的自我认知与外交行为: 冷战后新加坡外交的演变与新挑战”, pp. 47–48.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Leifer, *Singapore's Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Van Jackson, “Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14, no. 3 (September 2014): 331–56.

<sup>20</sup> 陈世凤, “应对大国崛起: 新加坡对华对冲战略评析”, p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> 陈世凤, “应对大国崛起: 新加坡对华对冲战略评析”; 许利平, “新加坡在 中美之间的平衡外交进入更艰难阶段”, *世界知识* No. 1792.05 (2021): 28–29.



Singapore's pragmatic policy towards China mirrors its ambition to uphold its status as a "global city"; and as a "global city", it regards diplomatic "autonomy" as a critical attribute. Chinese scholars surmise that Singapore's recognition of its pre-eminent regional position and identity as a "global city" fuels its commitment to leverage its geopolitical advantages, technological capacities, and soft power when engaging in extensive diplomacy and actively participating in regional and international affairs.<sup>22</sup>

Manifesting diplomatic autonomy and international influence forms an essential objective of Singapore's foreign policy. This influences its stance towards China. Ultimately, Beijing has accepted that Singapore will not unequivocally align with any major power, opting instead to act based on its national interests. According to Wang Yiwei, an international relations professor at Renmin University, Singapore's foreign policy is precise and even forward-looking, as demonstrated in its strategic wisdom in maintaining a balanced role amid China-US rivalry.<sup>23</sup>

However, Singapore's approach to China embodies a paradox in the era of China's rise. Due to its pragmatic foreign policy, Singapore may never fully gain China's trust and is often viewed as a "tool" in the great power competition.<sup>24</sup> This realization has dispelled Beijing's illusion that economic closeness will automatically translate into geopolitical alignment.<sup>25</sup> Chinese scholars urge Beijing to acknowledge Singapore's insistence on respect for international law, rules and principles over the "might makes right" mindset of powerful states.<sup>26</sup> China should also

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<sup>22</sup> 王琛, "小国的自我认知与外交行为: 冷战后新加坡外交的演变与新挑战", *太平洋学报* 29.02 (2021): 43–57.

<sup>23</sup> "中新蜜月期内李显龙访华, 新加坡再次踩准点?", *凤凰卫视*, 2023年4月3日, [https://ishare.ifeng.com/c/s/v0021RJfvmg8MRLO6lb\\_-wFPFf5dVGzIKjNaGu6vAKOUH6BE](https://ishare.ifeng.com/c/s/v0021RJfvmg8MRLO6lb_-wFPFf5dVGzIKjNaGu6vAKOUH6BE)

<sup>24</sup> 王琛, "小国的自我认知与外交行为: 冷战后新加坡外交的演变与新挑战".

<sup>25</sup> Lam Peng Er, "Singapore-China Relations in Geopolitics, Economics, Domestic Politics and Public Opinion: An Awkward 'Special Relationship'", *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10, no. 2 (2021): 203–17.

<sup>26</sup> 赵儒南, "新地区主义视角下的中国与新加坡合作模式研究", *世界经济与政治论坛* 03 (2020): 67–94.

understand Singapore's stance on utilizing third-party dispute resolution mechanisms, such as international arbitration, for solving various disputes.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Chinese scholars contend that Singapore's ability to maintain neutrality in the ongoing China-US rivalry in the Asia Pacific is becoming increasingly compromised. This perspective arises from challenges to Singapore's traditional strategy of economic cooperation with China, active engagement with powers beyond the region, and fostering regional unity amid escalating Sino-US tensions.<sup>28</sup> Historically, Singapore has played a crucial role in ASEAN, ensuring it does not lean excessively towards China or the US.<sup>29</sup> However, as these two global powers delve deeper into a competitive geopolitical and geo-economic standoff, it is becoming increasingly challenging for Singapore to maintain its balanced stance. For example, Prime Minister Lee has acknowledged Singapore and China's need to continuously nurture their relationship as it does not naturally remain stable.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, while aiming to strengthen bilateral ties, Prime Minister Lee's 2023 visit to China could potentially invite scrutiny and provoke dissatisfaction from the US. This conundrum reflects the complex dynamics Singapore has to grapple with in its foreign policy.<sup>31</sup>

## ISSUES OF CONCERN FOR SINGAPORE

The bilateral relationship between China and Singapore is complex and multi-faceted, involving robust economic ties and increasingly significant geopolitical divergences. During Prime Minister Lee Hsien

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<sup>27</sup> 赵儒南, “新地区主义视角下的中国与新加坡合作模式研究”, p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> 王高阳, “新加坡调整对华政策的动因、逻辑及启示”, *学术探索* 08 (2021): 56–65.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Toh Han Shih, “China Woos Singapore, Malaysia, Spain in Diplomatic Gambit”, *Asia Sentinel*, 4 April 2023, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/p/china-singapore-malaysia-spain-diplomatic-gambit>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Loong's visit to China, the primary focus was on economic and trade-related matters, with politically sensitive topics downplayed. In a way, this strategic approach reflects the geopolitical divergences between China and Singapore.<sup>32</sup> Singapore has adopted a cautious approach towards geopolitical issues in the context of the escalating tensions and deteriorating US-China relations, and its emphasis on national defence and national interests marks critical points of divergence between the two nations.

Three key areas of contention that have drawn increasing attention from Beijing are Singapore's longstanding relationship with Taiwan, its stance on the South China Sea dispute, and its ties with the US.

### *(A) The Taiwan Dilemma*

Singapore's historical connections with Taiwan, while once viewed with understanding by the Chinese leadership, have increasingly become a potential point of contention between China and Singapore. Prime Minister Lee's 2004 trip to Taiwan drew severe backlash from Beijing, underscoring China's longstanding objections to the "Starlight Project", which involves Singapore's military training in Taiwan.<sup>33</sup> The military training arrangement, notably the enduring "Starlight Project", has been criticized for lacking international legitimacy and having the potential to harm China's cross-strait relations.<sup>34</sup> Despite China's repeated attempts to have Singapore terminate this project in 1990 and 2004, Singapore has steadfastly refused, pointing to historical ties with Taiwan.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> 翟崑, "互信互利、惠及世界: 李显龙访华推动中新合作关系迈入新阶段", *中国网*, 2023年4月3日, [http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2023-04/04/content\\_85210313.shtml](http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2023-04/04/content_85210313.shtml)

<sup>33</sup> "China Protests Against Lee Hsien Loong's Visit to Taiwan", *China.org.cn*, 12 July 2004, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Jul/100934.htm>

<sup>34</sup> 周士新, "新加坡国防战略与防务外交", *印度洋经济体研究* 02 (2020): 20–34+157–58.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

These military links have become a security worry for China, particularly against the backdrop of escalating China-US tensions over Taiwan. The issue entered the public sphere with the 2016 “Armoured Vehicle Seizure Incident”, where nine armoured vehicles belonging to Singapore were confiscated in Hong Kong while *en route* from Taiwan.<sup>36</sup> As recently as 2019, the Singaporean government openly declared its intention to maintain its military ties with Taiwan, reflecting a pragmatic approach that places its key interests at the forefront.<sup>37</sup>

Singapore’s ongoing military relationship with Taiwan while maintaining diplomatic ties with China, raises questions about the validity of its stance on the “One China Principle”. Chinese academics posit that while Singapore reaps the benefits of long-established economic ties with mainland China, it is unwilling to sever substantive relations with Taiwan. While this encapsulates Singapore’s highly “pragmatic” policy towards China, it is undeniable that this stance could inflict significant damage on the long-term relationship between the two countries.<sup>38</sup>

As tensions between China and the US over Taiwan escalate, Singapore’s military ties with Taiwan have become a security concern for Beijing and potentially a public relations issue. Small and medium-sized states like Lithuania and the Philippines are easily caught in the middle of the Taiwan dilemma. China downgraded its diplomatic relations with Lithuania for allowing the Taiwan authority to use the words “Taiwan” instead of “Taipei” at the Island’s *de facto* embassy in Lithuania.<sup>39</sup> Beijing’s displeasure was also directed towards Manila for permitting the

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<sup>36</sup> “Hong Kong Armoured Vehicles Seizure: What We Know”, *BBC*, 25 November 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38101345>

<sup>37</sup> “Taiwan to Continue Military Relations with Singapore”, *Taiwan News*, 28 October 2019, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3804803>

<sup>38</sup> 王高阳, “新加坡调整对华政策的动因、逻辑及启示”, p. 58.

<sup>39</sup> “China Condemns Opening of Taiwan Office in Lithuania as ‘Egregious Act’”, *The Guardian*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/19/china-condemns-opening-of-taiwan-office-in-lithuania-as-egregious-act>

US to utilize three military bases north of the Philippines, directly facing Taiwan.<sup>40</sup> Singapore's long history of military training in Taiwan—unique among Asian nations maintaining diplomatic relations with China—will come under greater scrutiny by the Chinese public should an incident akin to the 2016 “Armoured Vehicle Seizure Incident” recur.

If Beijing categorically deems the Taiwan issue a red line—meaning that no state establishing diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China should maintain and cultivate official relations with Taipei—it raises the question of how Singapore's military relationship with Taiwan fits into China's “One China Principle”. Suppose the relationship between China and Singapore does not hold any “special” status, what would then justify China's tolerance of Singapore's breach of the “One China Policy”—a policy that China staunchly promulgates to all other nations?

China's power has steadily grown, leading to more power asymmetry between China and Singapore. From Beijing's perspective, its relationship with Singapore is no longer “special”. While China once took cues from Singapore's experiences during its reform and opening-up process, and Singapore acted as a “pathfinder” to some degree, the circumstances have markedly changed. Although Singapore maintains close economic and trade ties with China, China's substantive cooperation with ASEAN and countries along BRI has diminished Singapore's previous role as a “channel” and “pathfinder”. Furthermore, China's accelerated economic, trade and infrastructure projects with Malaysia and Indonesia in recent years stand as a veiled warning to Singapore, signalling that its geographical advantage is not irreplaceable. Consequently, Beijing is increasingly reluctant to give Singapore a “ClearPass” on Taiwan.

### *(B) The South China Sea Issue*

Even though Singapore is not directly involved in territorial or maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea, its stance has sparked bilateral tensions. From 2013 to 2016, the Chinese government and

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<sup>40</sup> Ma Bo, “Why China Is Vexed About the U.S.-Philippine EDCA”, *Fulcrum*, 19 April 2023, <https://fulcrum.sg/why-china-is-vexed-about-the-us-philippine-edca/>

Chinese scholars perceived Singapore's position and actions as going beyond its neutrality, and seemingly supporting other claimant states and the US stance via a "limited intervention" policy.<sup>41</sup> For example, Beijing believed Singapore was key in elevating the South China Sea dispute between China and its neighbours at the 2015 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, during Prime Minister Lee's visit to the US in August 2016, he asserted that the South China Sea arbitral award, which Beijing openly dismissed as "a piece of waste paper", was solid, binding, and deserving of respect.<sup>43</sup>

Seen from the perspective of Chinese policymakers, Singapore had been extraordinarily active on the South China Sea issue, and had attempted to internationalize the matter. Prime Minister Lee attended the Non-Aligned Movement Summit, where Singapore insisted on the endorsement of the arbitral ruling on the Philippines' South China Sea case in the final negotiated document, aiming to strengthen the document's South China Sea-related content.<sup>44</sup> He also expressed hope that Japan would continue to play an active role in the region during a conversation with then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, seemingly seeking to counterbalance China by drawing in Japan.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 刘霏, "印太"战略下的新加坡南海政策及其对中国海洋安全局势的影响", *中国矿业大学学报(社会科学版)* 23.02 (2021): 45–60.

<sup>42</sup> William Choong, "Chinese-U.S. Split Is Forcing Singapore to Choose Sides", *Foreign Policy*, 14 July 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/14/singapore-china-us-southeast-asia-asean-geopolitics/>

<sup>43</sup> "PM Lee Hsien Loong's Dialogue at the US Chamber of Commerce/USASEAN Business Council Reception", Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 1 August 2016, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-dialogue-us-chamber-commerce-us-asean-business-council-reception>; Chong Koh Ping, "China Asks Singapore to 'Respect' Its Position on South China Sea Ruling", *Straits Times*, 6 August 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-asks-singapore-to-respect-its-position-on-south-china-sea-ruling-and-asean>

<sup>44</sup> 王盼盼, "不结盟运动首脑会闭幕 新加坡不顾反对妄提南海仲裁", *环球时报*, 2016年9月21日, <https://m.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJXInM>

<sup>45</sup> Lin Yanqin, "S China Sea Dispute: Republic 'Does Not Take Sides But Has Key Interests' to Protect", *Today Online*, 29 September 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/s-china-sea-dispute-republic-does-not-take-sides-has-key-interests-protect>

Singapore's stance on the South China Sea has elicited significant displeasure within Chinese society. A public debate between Singapore's Ambassador to China, Lui Tuck Yew, and the Editor-in-Chief of the *Global Times*, Hu Xijin, caught the Chinese public's attention and generated substantial societal reactions.<sup>46</sup> In September 2016, the *Global Times* surveyed Chinese netizens about their perception of Singapore. The poll revealed that 98 per cent of respondents believed that Singapore's position on the South China Sea issue was "in line with the US and Japan", and they felt their positive perception of Singapore was deteriorating. This highlights sentiments held in China that Singapore as a non-claimant country should have made more effort to coordinate and resolve the dispute rather than contribute to its complexity.<sup>47</sup> An article published by the *Global Times* suggested that while China should understand Singapore's position, there also needed to be a limit.<sup>48</sup> As a smaller nation, Beijing could appreciate that Singapore needed to balance its relations with the two major powers, China and the US, and cooperate with the US on defence matters to ensure its security, but it could not accept Singapore actively assisting the US in opposing China in the South China Sea and in the broader Southeast Asian region.

As China sees it, Singapore's role in the South China Sea disputes has not been that of a mediator. Instead, it considers Singapore to be voicing the position of ASEAN. In 2016, Hua Chunying, a spokesperson for the Chinese foreign ministry, urged Singapore to maintain an objective and fair position, assume the role of a coordinating country in China-ASEAN relations, and promote the healthy and stable development of relations between China, Singapore, and ASEAN.<sup>49</sup> Beijing expected Singapore to

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<sup>46</sup> “新加坡搅和南海令中国不满 网民称其谄媚美国”, *环球时报*, 2016年9月30日, <https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJXSrd>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> 单仁平, “中国应体谅新加坡, 也要划出底线”, *环球时报*, 2016年8月4日, <https://m.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJWRyE>

<sup>49</sup> “外交部就新加坡总理李显龙有关南海问题言论答问”, *国务院新闻办公室网站*, 2016年8月5日, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gbwxfbh/xwfbh/wjb/Document/1486271/1486271.htm>

act as a facilitator in resolving the South China Sea disputes and provide a platform for dispute resolution. However, Singapore's actions did not meet these expectations. Singapore's confidence in weighing in on the South China Sea issue, even at the risk of short-term friction with China, was perceived as being buoyed by the US strategy of rebalancing to Asia.<sup>50</sup> From Beijing's perspective, Singapore's policy on the South China Sea appeared to support US military strengthening in the region.<sup>51</sup>

A military scholar, Liu Fei, contends that Singapore uses the "China threat" narrative to bolster its military cooperation with the US, ASEAN and other countries.<sup>52</sup> In China's view, Singapore's "limited intervention" in the South China Sea is an attempt to maximize Singapore's national interests at Beijing's expense.<sup>53</sup>

Even though relations have improved since 2017, Chinese scholars maintain that this is not due to changes in Singapore's hedging strategy but to China's broader diplomatic engagement with the countries in ASEAN.<sup>54</sup> From their perspective, Singapore's position and policy on the South China Sea issue have complicated China's attempts to resolve the disputes.<sup>55</sup> China and ASEAN's efforts have largely stabilized the situation in the South China Sea, but risks remain. Beijing identifies the primary risk as the interference of extra-regional powers, particularly the US, which seek their own strategic interests in the South China Sea and create instability unfavourable to China. Singapore's outspoken stance on the South China Sea is seen as it taking sides, leaning towards the US and other claimant countries; Beijing perceives this as detrimental to China's rights and interests in the South China Sea.

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<sup>50</sup> 陈世凤, "应对大国崛起: 新加坡对华对冲战略评析", p. 80.

<sup>51</sup> 刘霁, "印太"战略下的新加坡南海政策及其对中国海洋安全局势的影响", p. 48.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> 周士新, "新加坡国防战略与防务外交", p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> Lam Peng Er, "Singapore-China Relations in Geopolitics, Economics, Domestic Politics and Public Opinion: An Awkward 'Special Relationship?'".



In Beijing's eyes, Singapore's intervention in the South China Sea issue as a non-claimant state complicated matters and exerted additional pressure on China's relations with its neighbours.<sup>56</sup> Several of these neighbouring countries surround China, and Beijing believes Singapore's policy and attitude towards China could influence them. If China cannot effectively respond to Singapore's stance on the South China Sea, then it might encourage these neighbouring countries to play a more assertive role, thereby adding more pressure to China's regional diplomacy.<sup>57</sup> Although Singapore's involvement in the South China Sea disputes did not ultimately affect the trajectory of the dispute, it undoubtedly hampered China's efforts to seek a peaceful resolution, and increased international pressure on China. Singapore's frequent emphasis on international law and rules, and accusations of China's non-compliance have damaged China's long-cultivated positive international image.<sup>58</sup>

### *(C) The US Influence*

The relationship between Singapore and the US is both pragmatic and principled; Beijing does not however view this relationship as a direct threat to its own interests.<sup>59</sup> Chinese scholars recognize the various elements of this longstanding relationship, especially the military connection, such as Singapore's military modernization initiatives, its procurement of advanced weapons like the F-35 fighter jets, the frequency of joint military exercises between the two nations, and the substantial use of Changi military base by US forces. These are areas where China's defence ties with Singapore pale in comparison.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> 王高阳, “新加坡调整对华政策的动因、逻辑及启示”, pp. 62–63.

<sup>59</sup> Jeffrey Ordaniel and Collin Koh, “Pragmatic and Principled – U.S.-Singapore Relations as a Model Partnership in the Indo-Pacific”, *Issues & Insights* Vol. 21 SR4, pp. 1–4, <https://pacforum.org/publication/pragmatic-and-principled-u-s-singapore-relations-as-a-model-partnership-in-the-indo-pacific>

<sup>60</sup> 周士新, “新加坡国防战略与防务外交”; 王琛, “小国的自我认知与外交行为: 冷战后新加坡外交的演变与新挑战”; 查雯, “大国竞争升级下对冲战略的瓦解与延续——以澳大利亚、菲律宾、新加坡的对华政策为例”.

Beijing comprehends that Singapore's modernization efforts and its close defence ties with the US are dictated by Singapore's own requirements, such as the defence of its territorial integrity against potential threats from Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as the need to mitigate terrorist threats.<sup>61</sup> Due to its small size, Singapore's vulnerability drives its strategy of "making friends afar and striking close". Singapore perceives it cannot solely trust or depend on Southeast Asian countries or China for its security. Therefore, it needs substantive military cooperation with the US.

In addition, Singapore's defence strategy does not hinge solely on the US. Singapore emphasizes bilateral and multilateral military security cooperation and maintains military relations with various countries, and seeks collective security to ensure its safety. This strategy is embodied in the "shoal of fish" tactic advocated by Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>62</sup> It is also worth noting that experts, including those who have provided defence consultancy for multiple Asian countries, have cautioned Singapore about potential issues that could arise from excessive reliance on US military systems and equipment.<sup>63</sup> This implies that a balanced approach to defence cooperation may serve Singapore's long-term interests best.

Despite its heavy reliance on the US, Singapore does not exclude defence cooperation with China. There have been high-level defence dialogues and exchanges between China and Singapore, with the Shangri-La Dialogue and the Xiangshan Forum serving as notable platforms for such communication. In 2019, an updated version of the Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed between the two countries, establishing mechanisms for military exercises, troop visits, defence

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<sup>61</sup> 陈世凤, "应对大国崛起: 新加坡对华对冲战略评析", p. 81.

<sup>62</sup> 刘霏, "印太"战略下的新加坡南海政策及其对中国海洋安全局势的影响", pp. 48–49.

<sup>63</sup> Mercedes Ruehl, "Singapore Deepens US Defence Ties Despite Chinese Financial Inflows", *Financial Times*, 30 April 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/0c20823d-2d5f-435e-aec4-269dbe5dafb4>

minister dialogues, and other forms of defence exchange and security cooperation.<sup>64</sup>

From Beijing's perspective, Singapore's defence ties with the US and other partners far exceed its defence relationship with China on multiple fronts. First, Singapore has signed defence cooperation agreements with several other countries, including the US, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and India.<sup>65</sup> Second, it has also made its Changi Naval Base available to many nations apart from the US, although the latter utilizes them most extensively.<sup>66</sup> Third, Singapore frequently engages in multilateral military exercises with other countries, and the US remains its most reliable partner for such exercises. Lastly, Singapore is a significant purchaser of US-made weapons and is among the few countries that have acquired the advanced F-35 fighter jet from the US.<sup>67</sup> All of the above indicate that China cannot match Singapore's defence ties with the US.

In addition to military ties, Singapore's economic reliance on the US is greater than generally perceived.<sup>68</sup> The simplistic binary assumption that Singapore's economy is dependent on China and its security is dependent on the US is thus potentially misleading. Data from the Office of the United States Trade Representative show that the total value of goods and services traded between the US and Singapore in 2020 was approximately US\$93.7 billion. Furthermore, foreign direct investment (FDI) from the US to Singapore in 2020 amounted to US\$270.8 billion, accounting for over 20 per cent of foreign investments in Singapore and

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<sup>64</sup> 游润恬, “新中更新防务协定 显著提升双边合作”, *联合早报*, 2019年10月21日, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/special/report/singapore/sg-cn/story20191021-998636>

<sup>65</sup> 陈世凤, “应对大国崛起: 新加坡对华对冲战略评析”, p. 81.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Wong Kai Yi and Lim Min Zhang, “Singapore's F-35 Jet Purchase Part of Longstanding Bilateral Relationship: US Official”, *Straits Times*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/purchase-of-f-35-jets-part-of-long-standing-relationship-with-singapore-us-officials>

<sup>68</sup> 范磊, “新加坡发展与中国关系的理性逻辑和双重面向”, p. 159.

making the US the largest source of foreign investments for Singapore.<sup>69</sup> Singapore is a non-allied partner that acts like an ally.<sup>70</sup> Despite Singapore's official status as a non-allied partner, Chinese scholars observe that its cooperation with the US, particularly on security matters, is so deep and extensive that it surpasses the level of cooperation typically seen among traditional allies.

Regarding military affairs, Singapore publicly supports the stationing of US troops in the Indo-Pacific region. It has a contract with the US that grants American forces access to its naval and air bases.<sup>71</sup> The US Air Force can use airports in Singapore, and US ships can dock at any port in Singapore without prior notice.<sup>72</sup> The US has also stationed its latest weapons and equipment in Singapore. These conditions underscore the significance of the US-Singapore defence relationship, which China acknowledges but cannot currently match.

Singapore's close alignment with the US-led international rules-based order reflects a more profound affinity with the US on political, economic, and security matters than with China. Singapore is cautious not to be perceived as China's "outpost" in Southeast Asia, especially by its neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia.<sup>73</sup> Singapore's careful balance derives from its multi-ethnic society, where a significant tilt towards Beijing could cause internal unrest and potential disruptions to societal harmony.<sup>74</sup> Beijing understands the complexities within Singapore's

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<sup>69</sup> "Singapore", *USTR*, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/singapore>

<sup>70</sup> William Choong, "Chinese-U.S. Split Is Forcing Singapore to Choose Sides".

<sup>71</sup> Dewey Sim, "Singapore Renews Military Bases Pact with US Amid Deepening Defence Ties with China", *South China Morning Post*, 24 September 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3030111/china-will-be-wary-us-singapore-deal-military-bases>

<sup>72</sup> 刘霏, "印太"战略下的新加坡南海政策及其对中国海洋安全局势的影响", p. 51.

<sup>73</sup> 陈世凤, "应对大国崛起: 新加坡对华对冲战略评析", p. 84.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

domestic politics, particularly its attribute of being a “multiracial society”. This recognition can be traced back to the era of Deng Xiaoping when Deng appreciated this distinctive characteristic during his 1978 visit to Singapore.<sup>75</sup> Chinese scholars studying Singapore also comprehensively understand this situation, acknowledging it as a critical factor influencing Singapore’s policy formulation towards China. They urge Beijing to demonstrate an understanding of Singapore’s difficulty in aligning closely with China regarding value preferences.<sup>76</sup>

However, the successful hedging strategy that Singapore has used to balance relations between China and the US may face challenges if tensions between the two superpowers escalate. In a climate where “economic security is national security”, if Singapore openly sides with the US in technological disputes or embargos against China, Beijing might reassess its acceptance of Singapore’s close security ties with the US.<sup>77</sup> This could push China to pressure Singapore into limiting its security cooperation with the US. The Straits of Malacca, for example, holds significant strategic interest for China, with many of its ships passing through annually.<sup>78</sup> Singapore’s allowance of a US presence at Changi Naval Base could put China’s trade routes under US surveillance and control.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, Singapore might be asked to provide logistical support to US troops, putting it in a diplomatically challenging position.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> 傅高义, 《邓小平时代》, 北京: 生活·读书·新知三联书店 2013 年版, p. 284.

<sup>76</sup> 范磊, “新加坡发展与中国关系的理性逻辑和双重面向”, 《当代世界社会主义问题》.01 (2021): 158–67.

<sup>77</sup> Mercedes Ruehl, “Singapore Deepens US Defence Ties Despite Chinese Financial Inflows”, *Financial Times*, 30 April 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/0c20823d-2d5f-435e-aec4-269dbe5dafb4>

<sup>78</sup> Ian Storey, “China’s ‘Malacca Dilemma’”, *China Brief*, 12 April 2006, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-malacca-dilemma/>

<sup>79</sup> 王高阳, “新加坡调整对华政策的动因、逻辑及启示”, p. 57.

<sup>80</sup> 薛小山, “‘我不是北京耳语者’ 李显龙访美否认为中国说项 强调不希望印太热战”, 《美国之音》, 2022年3月31日, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/singapore-lee-hsien-loong-denies-beijing-whisperer-20220330/6508535.html>

Increased military cooperation between Singapore and the US, especially in the context of China-US military rivalry, poses future concerns for Beijing. William Choong, a security expert from the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, underlines that Singapore aims to balance its relations with both powers and avoid taking sides.<sup>81</sup> However, as a US Navy admiral noted, this balanced position is increasingly precarious, likening Singapore's situation to walking a tightrope.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, Beijing must navigate this delicate situation carefully, understanding the implications of Singapore's complex relationship with the US and the potential strategic consequences that could ensue.

## SINGAPORE AS A MEDITATOR?

As the relationship between China and the US worsens, Singapore has voiced its expectation for the two superpowers to maintain open communication channels and work out a new basis of engagement with each other. Escalation and worsening of China-US relations could have detrimental effects on Singapore. Chinese scholars have posited that Singapore's hedging strategy can only be effectively employed when relations between China and the US are stable. However, as the competition between these two powers intensifies, Singapore faces the dilemma of choosing sides, challenging its erstwhile diplomatic logic of navigating between the two major powers.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> William Choong, "China-US Relations: Singapore's Elusive Sweet Spot", *ISEAS Perspective*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2020-80-china-us-relations-singapores-elusive-sweet-spot-by-william-choong/>

<sup>82</sup> William Choong, "How Long Can Singapore Walk the Tightrope between the US and China?", *The Strategist*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-long-can-singapore-walk-the-tightrope-between-the-us-and-china/>

<sup>83</sup> 范磊, "新加坡发展与中国关系的理性逻辑和双重面向", *当代世界社会主义问题*. 01 (2021): 158–67; 王高阳, "新加坡调整对华政策的动因、逻辑及启示", *学术探索*. 08 (2021): 56–65.

Singapore's leadership has consistently warned about the potentially devastating consequences for the region if a conflict between China and the US were to break out.<sup>84</sup> During his visit to the US in 2022, Prime Minister Lee highlighted that a full-blown conflict in the Indo-Pacific region is in no one's interest. He expressed his belief that there is space for coordination, as the interests of Washington and Beijing are not entirely incompatible.<sup>85</sup>

Considering this context, there are increasing calls within Singapore for the country to take on a more active role as a mediator between China and the US.<sup>86</sup> This role aligns with Singapore's national interests and self-perception as a regional power and a "global city". Singapore has a history of providing a neutral platform for negotiations and peace talks between disputing parties. For instance, it hosted the 1993 Wang-Koo Talks, a crucial point in cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan, and the 2015 summit between Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou. These events clearly show Singapore's capability to facilitate discussions and smooth relations between conflicting parties. Thus, playing the role of a mediator between China and the US could be a strategic move for Singapore amid the escalating tensions.

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<sup>84</sup> Chen Lin, "'Storm Is Gathering'—Singapore PM Warns of Risk of U.S.-China Miscalculation", Reuters, 8 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/singapore-pm-warns-worsening-geopolitical-climate-national-address-2022-08-08/>; Philip Heijmans and Niluksi Koswanage, "Singapore's Next Premier Wong Warns US, China May 'Sleepwalk Into Conflict'", *Bloomberg*, 16 August 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-15/next-singapore-pm-warns-us-china-may-sleepwalk-into-conflict#xj4y7vzkg>

<sup>85</sup> Maria Siow, "Singapore's Lee Cautions US against 'Everyone but China' Approach in Asia Engagement, Says 'More Pleased' if Hong Kong Expats Stayed Put", *South China Morning Post*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3173870/singapores-lee-cautions-us-against-everything-china-approach>

<sup>86</sup> "Singapore Says It's Willing to Play the Mediator Between Global Economic Rivals U.S. and China", *Time*, 8 March 2023, <https://time.com/6261248/singapore-us-china-dialogue/#>; Han Fook Kwang, "What Will It Take to Bridge the US-China Gulf?", *Straits Times*, 27 April 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/what-will-it-take-to-bridge-the-us-china-gulf>

Nevertheless, the magnitude and influence of both China and the US present significant challenges to Singapore's ability to exert influence over the situation. Recent events have underscored Singapore's limitations in mediating and facilitating dialogue between the two superpowers. For instance, the 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue highlighted these difficulties, when the Chinese Minister of Defence refused to meet his US counterpart. Following the "balloon" incident between China and the US in February 2023, which delayed US Secretary of State Blinken's visit to China, China-US relations remained tense, with dialogue and communication largely halted.<sup>87</sup> Expectations were high that the Shangri-La Dialogue could act as an icebreaker and restart dialogue between these two countries. However, despite Singapore's substantial efforts, the defence ministers of both nations did not meet for talks.<sup>88</sup>

Mutual distrust between China and the US has made effective communication difficult. These challenges are primarily rooted in their respective domestic political complexities and significantly different dialogue approaches. This represents the most daunting challenge for Singapore as a mediator. Furthermore, any perceived bias towards one side could jeopardize Singapore's relations with the other. Maintaining a delicate balance amid the competition between major powers like China and the US has become increasingly challenging for Singapore.

Despite these hurdles, if carefully managed, Singapore's successful track record of facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties could make it a valuable player in easing tensions between China and the US. This role would align with Singapore's overall foreign policy approach, which emphasizes maintaining positive relations with all major powers and promoting a rules-based international order. As a small but influential state, Singapore could provide a neutral platform that encourages open dialogue and fosters understanding.

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<sup>87</sup> “外交部回应美方推迟布林肯访华 重申飞艇偏离预定航线完全是不可抗力意外”，*财新网*，2023年2月4日，<https://international.caixin.com/2023-02-04/101994765.html>

<sup>88</sup> “社论：香格里拉对话任重道远”，*联合早报*，2023年6月6日，<https://www.zaobao.com.sg/forum/editorial/story20230606-1401488>



## CONCLUSION

The relationship between China and Singapore is nuanced, dynamic, and fraught with cooperation and divergences on various regional issues. Singapore's delicate balancing act amid the increasing tensions between the two superpowers, China and the US, underlines its pragmatic diplomacy and exposes it to potential risks. The early amicable relations between the leaders of both countries and Singapore's significant contributions to China's economic development have fostered an enduring relationship of mutual trust. This trust, grounded in political confidence and economic interdependence, has seen Beijing demonstrate considerable understanding and tolerance towards Singapore's diplomatic strategies.

However, the escalating competition between China and the US stands to alter Beijing's perception of Singapore. The political-security dimensions of the relationship between China and Singapore are complex and constantly evolving, influenced by factors such as Singapore's military training in Taiwan, the contentious South China Sea disputes, and the impact of US foreign policy in the region. Beijing will likely adopt a more assertive posture concerning Singapore's multifaceted connections with Taiwan, especially in military training, as tensions between China and the US over the Taiwan issue continue to rise.

In addition, Singapore's stance on the South China Sea issue is perceived by Beijing as undermining China's interests and increasing diplomatic pressure on the nation. Furthermore, Singapore's deepening defence ties with the US, despite its claims of maintaining neutrality, are perceived in Beijing as a potential risk that could see Singapore become an "important accomplice" to the US in containing China's growing influence in Southeast Asia.

The intensifying rivalry between China and the US threatens to erode the trust that has traditionally underpinned the relationship between China and Singapore, rendering their bilateral ties increasingly fragile. As China's power and influence continue to grow, the asymmetrical interdependence between the two nations provides Beijing with increased leverage over Singapore. Should Beijing perceive a deviation in Singapore's actions from its expected path, a stern reassessment of the

China-Singaporean relationship would likely ensue. As such, Singapore's longstanding hedging strategy between the two superpowers may face increasingly severe tests. Despite the thriving economic connections between China and Singapore, the shifting geopolitical landscape presents new challenges. The tango between the dragon and the lion city will undoubtedly remain a subject of keen interest.

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