

## SINGAPORE-US RELATIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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### Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji hubungan Singapura-AS dan implikasinya bagi Asia Tenggara. Negara-negara kecil harus menavigasi tantangan geopolitik yang kompleks dalam lanskap global yang terus berubah untuk menjaga stabilitas dan pertumbuhan. Berposisi strategis di Asia Tenggara, Singapura telah memperkuat hubungan dengan AS di tengah meningkatnya ketegangan AS-Tiongkok dan masalah keamanan regional. Makalah ini menganalisis bagaimana pergeseran geopolitik telah membentuk kerja sama bilateral, menerapkan teori hubungan internasional seperti realisme dan institusionalisme liberal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa peningkatan kolaborasi militer dan perjanjian ekonomi, termasuk kesepakatan perdagangan bebas, telah memperkuat peran Singapura sebagai mitra utama AS. Kemitraan ini telah berkontribusi pada stabilitas regional, integrasi ekonomi, dan keterlibatan diplomatik. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa pendekatan Singapura berfungsi sebagai model untuk diplomasi negara kecil, yang menawarkan wawasan untuk kebijakan luar negeri Vietnam dengan AS

### Abstract

This paper examines the Singapore-US relationship and its implications for Southeast Asia. In a shifting global landscape, small states must navigate complex geopolitical challenges to maintain stability and growth. Singapore, strategically positioned in Southeast Asia, has strengthened ties with the US amid rising US-China tensions and regional security concerns. It analyses how geopolitical shifts have shaped bilateral cooperation, applying international relations theories such as realism and liberal institutionalism. The findings show that enhanced military collaboration and economic agreements, including free trade deals, have reinforced Singapore's role as a key US partner. This partnership has contributed to regional stability, economic integration, and diplomatic engagement. The study concludes that Singapore's approach serves as a model for small-state diplomacy, offering insights for Vietnam's foreign policy with the US.

## INTRODUCTION

The strategic partnership between Singapore and the United States has evolved into one of the relationships between Singapore and the United States under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has marked a significant evolution of their traditional ties, particularly in the context of rapidly changing global and regional dynamics. Since Prime Minister Lee's assumption of office in 2004, Singapore-US relations have deepened in response to the shifting political, security, and economic landscapes, leading to breakthrough developments in their partnership. These include key legal frameworks such as the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement, the 2015 Singapore-US Strategic Partnership, and the renewal of the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding regarding the US military presence in Singapore. Under Lee's leadership, a third pillar—Strategic Dialogue—was added alongside the traditional focuses of trade and national security, allowing for a more proactive and dynamic approach to tackling emerging non-traditional security challenges. This evolving relationship has not only strengthened traditional areas of collaboration, such as defence and trade, but has also expanded into new fields, solidifying Singapore's position as a key partner of the

US in Southeast Asia. The transformation of the relationship under Prime Minister Lee has led to the elevation of Singapore-US ties to the level of a Strategic Partnership, fostering deeper cooperation in response to the challenges of a changing international environment. As a result, security cooperation, trade and investment relations, and people-to-people exchanges have become the core areas of growth, underpinning the mutual strategic and developmental interests of both nations.

On the topic of Strategic Partnership and Security Cooperation, Adelman (2012) analyses the evolving strategic partnership between Singapore and the United States. He argues that Singapore's role in US foreign policy has significantly increased, particularly regarding defence cooperation. Security collaborations between Singapore and the United States have been marked by joint military exercises and the deployment of US assets, reflecting a deepening strategic alignment. The transformation of Singapore's military diplomacy is also reflected in initiatives such as the RSAF F-15SG Fighter Detachment in the US, underscoring the depth of bilateral defense engagements (Tan, 2011)

Regarding economic and trade relations, Singapore's partnership with the United States is frequently cited as a model of bilateral integration in the Asia-Pacific. Analysts highlight the role of the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement in shaping strong trade and investment flows between the two nations (Dent, 2010). Moreover, the institutional links between economic and defense cooperation, such as those outlined in recent analyses of strategic alignment, demonstrate how trade relations are increasingly interwoven with security policy (Dolven & Chanlett-Avery, 2022)-

When considering geopolitical implications and regional stability, several scholarly analyses examine the broader context influencing Singapore-US relations. Choiruzzad (2017) explores the "low profile, high impact" diplomatic strategies employed by smaller Southeast Asian nations, providing insights into Singapore's approach to balancing major powers. Storey (2007) analyzes Singapore's nuanced response to China's growing assertiveness, including maritime tensions in the South China Sea. Similarly, Liu and Tran (2024) highlight how Singapore navigates its strategic partnerships without compromising its neutrality, offering a pragmatic model for

small-state diplomacy in a competitive regional environment.

Collectively, these contributions offer a comprehensive understanding of Singapore-US relations, illuminating their strategic depth, economic significance, and regional impact. This paper builds on these works to explore how Singapore's engagement with the US can serve as a model for small-state diplomacy, providing valuable lessons for regional actors navigating global uncertainties.

## ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

This paper analyzes the evolution of Singapore-U.S. relations from 2004 to 2023 and their broader implications for Southeast Asia. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, bilateral ties have been strengthened through key agreements, including the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement and the 2015 elevation to a Strategic Partnership. Drawing on Keohane and Nye (1989) theory of power and interdependence, as well as perspectives on the security dilemma from Glaser (1997) and Waltz (1979) this study assesses the impact of these developments on defense cooperation, trade, and non-traditional security areas such as cybersecurity,

counterterrorism, and environmental challenges. Furthermore, the research situates Singapore-U.S. relations within the broader regional order of Southeast Asia, utilizing Acharya's (2014) framework on security community-building and Walt's (1989) insights on alliance formation.

By employing an analytical framework that synthesizes realism and liberal institutionalism, this paper examines how strategic alignment and institutional mechanisms have both reinforced bilateral ties and shaped broader regional stability, economic interdependence, and security dynamics. Drawing on realist perspectives, particularly Mearsheimer's (2001) and Waltz's (1979) views on power politics and security dilemmas, the study assesses how Singapore navigates its relationship with the U.S. amid great power competition. At the same time, leveraging insights from Keohane and Nye (1989) on interdependence and institutional cooperation, the paper explores how economic agreements and multilateral engagements contribute to regional order. Through a qualitative analysis of key agreements and policies, this research underscores Singapore's strategic agency in shaping Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape amid evolving global power structures.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using a combination of historical analysis, policy review, and case study methodology to examine the evolving relationship between Singapore and the United States in the 21st century. Primary sources, including official government documents, trade agreements, and security cooperation records, are analyzed to understand the key developments in their bilateral ties. Secondary sources, such as academic articles, books, and policy reports, provide context and a broader perspective on the geopolitical implications of this relationship for Southeast Asia. The analysis focuses on key areas such as trade, security collaboration, and diplomatic initiatives, and highlights the implications of these developments for regional stability. Additionally, the study compares the Singapore-US relationship with the experiences of other Southeast Asian nations, offering insights for its own foreign policy strategy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **The Dynamics of Southeast Asia in the First Two Decades of the 21st Century**

The competition for influence and interests between major powers, particularly

between the United States and China, is becoming increasingly intense. Due to its strategic geographic location, Southeast Asia remains a battleground for the competition of influence and national interests among global powers, especially between the US and China. After more than a decade of limited focus on Southeast Asia, the United States began to turn its attention back to the region in the early 21st century. The goals the US pursued with its renewed interest in Southeast Asia included drawing the countries of the region into the fight against terrorism led by the US and countering China's growing influence in the area. To achieve these objectives, the US revived its military alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, and strengthened military ties with Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. In tandem with the political and security ties, the US introduced various initiatives to enhance economic relations with ASEAN countries.

The US policy toward Southeast Asia underwent significant changes when President Barack Obama implemented the “Pivot to Asia” strategy (Castro, 2013). The goal of this strategic shift was to enhance and maintain the leadership role of the US in the Asia-Pacific region while safeguarding

American interests. To achieve these objectives, the US introduced several key approaches, including strengthening bilateral security alliances, deepening relations with emerging countries including China, participating in regional multilateral organizations, expanding trade and investment, establishing a robust military foundation, and promoting democracy and human rights. Southeast Asia occupies a vital position in the US' rebalance strategy. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton viewed ASEAN as "the anchor for the emerging regional structure." Due to this importance, Southeast Asia became a central focus of the US rebalance policy. In its pursuit, the US enhanced its security relations with Thailand and the Philippines—longstanding allies—while also bolstering military ties with Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

Along with political and security ties, the US proposed numerous initiatives to foster economic relations with ASEAN. Under Obama's new policy, the US drove comprehensive cooperation with ASEAN (Castro, 2013). The first noticeable action was the organization of the first US-ASEAN Summit in late 2009. By the end of 2013, the ASEAN-US Summit process had become institutionalized. With new legal and

institutional foundations, ASEAN-US relations have grown ever stronger. At the third summit in November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, the partnership was elevated to a strategic partnership. Following this upgrade, a special summit hosted by President Obama was held in Sunnylands, California, in February 2016, where leaders discussed future cooperation and key guiding principles. At this occasion, leaders issued the Sunnylands Declaration. In addition to bilateral relations with ASEAN, the US continued to engage and contribute to multilateral cooperation initiatives spearheaded by ASEAN. In July 2009, the US signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), allowing it to officially join the East Asia Summit (EAS) led by ASEAN. In 2011, the US, alongside Russia, formally joined EAS and made significant contributions to its collaborative activities. The US also actively participated in ASEAN/PMC, ARF, ADMM+, and other ASEAN initiatives. The growing US presence in Southeast Asia aligns with ASEAN's post-Cold War policy of balancing influence among major powers in the region. Consequently, ASEAN and its member states have welcomed US involvement. New developments in US-ASEAN relations have raised concerns in China. To maintain its

political and economic influence in Southeast Asia, China has sought to reassure ASEAN about the peaceful rise of its power, emphasizing the benefits it can bring to the region. Simultaneously, China has made bold moves to strengthen its ties with ASEAN, signing several key agreements with ASEAN between 2002-2003, including the Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the ASEAN-China Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, which aimed at establishing the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area.

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has intensified its competition with the US for influence in Southeast Asia. China has introduced new initiatives to help ASEAN nations address development challenges, such as the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the implementation of Belt and Road Initiative projects in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Area was also upgraded in 2019. As a result, trade and investment between ASEAN and China have continued to grow, making China ASEAN's largest trading partner in 2012 and ASEAN China's largest trading partner in 2021.

However, alongside these friendly initiatives, China has continued actions that

align with its ambitions in the South China Sea. In 2014, China occupied additional islands in the region claimed by the Philippines, and continued to militarize its existing holdings by constructing military airports, ports, and other infrastructure, posing a maritime security threat to international shipping lanes. Thus, despite the strong economic ties between ASEAN and China, concerns regarding China's regional motives remain, particularly among ASEAN leaders such as Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. As a result, despite efforts by China, ASEAN has not fully aligned itself with China, particularly when the US, under President Donald Trump, downplayed Southeast Asia's importance. US-China competition in the region has heated up again since President Joe Biden's administration took office in 2021. Just five months after China upgraded its relations with ASEAN to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in December 2021, the US also elevated its relationship with ASEAN to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in May 2022. However, due to distractions from the Russia-Ukraine war and domestic challenges, the US has yet to take significant action to fulfill its strategic partnership with ASEAN. The instability in US policy toward Southeast

Asia has raised concerns among regional leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. This instability threatens to disrupt the balance of influence between major powers, a critical factor for peace and security in the region. Southeast Asian nations could be forced into a difficult decision of choosing between the US or China, a choice that most countries in the region, especially Singapore, wish to avoid.

The US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia has also had a significant impact on other global powers with substantial economic and political interests in the region. Since the early 21st century, Japan, India, the EU, and Russia have all adjusted their policies toward Southeast Asia to engage more deeply with ASEAN, protecting and expanding their regional interests. The emerging dynamics among the US, China, and other major powers have made Southeast Asia a lively and tense arena for political and economic transformation. These developments are among the most dramatic changes the region has experienced since the beginning of the 21st century.

The process of regional integration in Southeast Asia, which began in 1992, has achieved positive results after the ten-year effort to establish the ASEAN Free Trade



Area (AFTA). However, AFTA has yet to bring about a breakthrough in intra-regional trade, which all ASEAN member states had hoped for. Meanwhile, China's growing economic competition in traditional ASEAN markets, such as the US, EU, and Japan, has continued to increase. In the security domain, although the risk of war and conflict has diminished, non-traditional security challenges have emerged, and they are even stronger than in the first decade after the Cold War ended. The rise of separatist terrorism in southern Thailand, Mindanao in the Philippines, and Aceh in Indonesia has exacerbated these concerns. Other ASEAN countries also face similar risks. In addition to the threat of terrorism, Southeast Asian nations are also confronted with various non-traditional security issues, particularly new diseases caused by climate change. Between 2003 and 2006, the region experienced two major outbreaks of avian flu. Against this backdrop, relations between some ASEAN countries have become strained due to territorial and maritime disputes, especially in the South China Sea.

To overcome these challenges, at the 9th ASEAN Summit in Bali, Indonesia, in October 2003, ASEAN leaders decided to deepen regional integration by building the ASEAN Community, based on three pillars:

the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The APSC, AEC, and ASCC "will be intricately woven together to enhance and complement each other in the pursuit of peace, stability, and prosperity in Southeast Asia." The establishment of the ASEAN Community aligns with the interests of Southeast Asian nations, including Singapore. Upon its successful development, ASEAN will evolve into a community of nations united in dynamic partnerships, enhancing the region's resilience, creating internal balance, and facilitating the successful implementation of the region's policy of balancing relations with major powers.

### **The development of Singapore-US relations in the first two decades of the 21st century.**

On politics and diplomacy, under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the political and diplomatic relations between Singapore and the United States have flourished significantly. The two countries have frequently engaged in high-level visits and signed numerous important cooperation agreements, thereby promoting a strong bilateral relationship. The first notable visit



occurred in July 2005, when Prime Minister Lee made an official visit to the United States shortly after assuming office. Following this, a series of subsequent visits took place, with the most prominent being his visit in August 2016. During this trip, Prime Minister Lee met with President Barack Obama and emphasized the importance of the United States playing a more active role in the Asia-Pacific region, which is strategically significant to American policy. In response, President Obama praised Singapore as a 'lynchpin' for U.S. presence in Asia, placing it on par with Japan and Australia.

A key milestone in their bilateral relations came with the Joint Statement between Singapore and the U.S. in 2016, which reaffirmed their strong strategic partnership and set out directions for future cooperation. The main areas of focus were economic collaboration, defense cooperation, and science and technology, with commitments to free trade, cybersecurity, and digital innovation. Notably, the U.S. and Singapore pledged to strengthen their cooperation on cybersecurity matters and addressing global security threats. These visits and meetings between leaders not only reinforced the bilateral relationship but also contributed to fostering stability both within

the region and globally, with Singapore playing an essential role as a mediator between the U.S. and ASEAN countries.

Additionally, through these engagements, both countries recognized their mutual benefits in areas such as trade, regional security, and scientific collaboration, further solidifying their commitment to long-term strategic partnerships. Singapore's alignment with U.S. foreign policy goals in the Asia-Pacific and its advocacy for a multilateral approach to regional security have made it an indispensable partner for the United States. Singapore continues to be a crucial player in navigating the complex dynamics of the U.S.-China rivalry and advancing the stability of Southeast Asia within the broader context of global diplomacy.

Under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, security and defense cooperation between Singapore and the United States reached new heights, marked by several key agreements and an increase in joint activities. A significant milestone came in 2005 with the signing of the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which not only facilitated joint military exercises but also expanded cooperation in areas such as maritime security, counterterrorism, and addressing

non-traditional security threats. The partnership continued to grow, with the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) allowing U.S. military use of Singapore's facilities, which was extended for another 15 years in 2019. The SFA, which recognized Singapore as a "Major Security Cooperation Partner," enhanced collaboration in areas such as counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, joint exercises, and defense technology. Furthermore, the 2015 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) further solidified defense ties between the two countries.

These agreements created a robust framework for military cooperation, enabling the use of Singapore's military bases for activities like joint exercises, training, defense technology research, and maritime security initiatives. Following diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and the Philippines, Singapore proactively opened its Paya Lebar Airbase and Sembawang Wharves to U.S. aircraft and naval vessels, ensuring continued training and operational effectiveness. The MOU, initially signed in 1990, allows for the rotation of U.S. fighter jets, naval patrols, and reconnaissance flights, with the arrangement extended through 2035. Regular high-level dialogues, such as the U.S.-Singapore Strategic Security

Dialogue, held its 12th session in 2022, underscoring the strength and consistency of the defense partnership. Even amidst challenges such as Covid-19, the dialogue continued, showcasing the depth of military cooperation between the two nations.

The collaboration is further supported by new mechanisms, such as the Singapore-U.S. Defense Dialogue Forum and regular defense ministerial meetings that address both regional and global security issues. These efforts not only deepen the strategic relationship between Singapore and the U.S. but also enhance their coordination on pressing non-traditional security matters, including counterterrorism, humanitarian aid, and disaster response. Through these combined efforts, both nations are better equipped to address complex global security challenges (Liu & Tran, 2024).

Regarding maritime security, the Strait of Malacca is a primary concern for both Singapore and the United States, as the threat of terrorism in the area remains significant due to insufficient security measures. Singapore, located at the crossroads of the Strait of Malacca and the Singapore Strait, sits on one of the world's busiest and most critical maritime shipping routes, with one of the busiest ports globally. Nearly all of the country's international trade is conducted by

sea, making Singapore's security and prosperity highly dependent on global maritime trade. Under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's leadership, defense and security cooperation between Singapore and the U.S. significantly expanded and strengthened. Both nations elevated their defense relationship through key agreements and mechanisms, including those addressing security concerns in the Strait of Malacca. Recognizing the critical importance of securing maritime trade routes, particularly in an era of escalating threats, both countries have worked together to bolster regional stability, promote safe shipping practices, and protect against threats such as piracy and terrorism. This strategic partnership is key not only for safeguarding maritime traffic but also for ensuring the economic well-being of both nations.

Economically, before 2004, the relationship between Singapore and the United States was largely cooperative. However, after the implementation of the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (SUSFTA) in 2004, their economic ties moved to a higher level. The integration brought about by SUSFTA has enabled both countries to leverage their comparative advantages for mutual growth. Through

enhanced trade relations, Singapore has been able to tap into the vast U.S. market for its exports, while U.S. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Singapore has provided ample resources for Singapore's post-Covid recovery strategies set out by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. For the U.S., American companies have benefited from Singapore's well-developed infrastructure, high-quality workforce, and strategic position as a major international trade hub, expanding business within the Asia-Pacific region.

In addition to the momentum from SUSFTA, another important factor contributing to the growth of economic relations between Singapore and the United States is the alignment of their economic perspectives on global issues. Both countries share a strong commitment to free trade, the rule of law, and intellectual property protection, which forms the basis for their frequent economic consensus (Dent, 2010). Another driving force behind the development of economic ties has been the increasing legal framework for cooperation in the field.

Both governments have not only shared common views on global economic issues but have also taken concrete steps to strengthen the legal and institutional

foundations for their bilateral cooperation. In response to the global credit tightening during the Covid-19 economic downturn, the United States and Singapore signed a Memorandum of Understanding in December 2020 aimed at improving trade financing and investment facilitation for companies in both countries. This initiative was part of a broader strategic effort to bolster economic resilience and business connectivity between the two nations ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (Dolven & Chanlett-Avery, 2022).

With all these factors in play, economic relations between Singapore and the U.S. have grown significantly in recent years. In 2022, Singapore was the U.S.'s 15th-largest trading partner, with bilateral merchandise trade reaching \$78 billion (Dolven & Chanlett-Avery, 2022). The U.S. is the largest foreign investor in Singapore, accounting for nearly a quarter of U.S. FDI in the region (Dolven & Chanlett-Avery, 2022). The United States remains Singapore's top partner in services trade, while Singapore ranks among the largest Asian investors in the United States. This robust trade partnership is reflected in the long-term growth of bilateral trade, with consistent increases in both exports and imports since the mid-1990s. Such trends underscore the

strategic economic alignment between the two countries, supported institutionally by the U.S.–Singapore Free Trade Agreement and subsequent initiatives to enhance trade flows (Dent, 2010; Dolven & Chanlett-Avery, 2022).

Although U.S. exports to Singapore have grown faster and surpassed Singapore's exports in value, the trade volume from a small country like Singapore remains substantial. Despite this asymmetry, Singapore has not raised concerns about the trade deficit, reflecting the pragmatic nature of its economic diplomacy. Analysts have observed that since the implementation of the U.S.–Singapore Free Trade Agreement, bilateral trade has grown significantly, with the United States consistently maintaining a trade surplus (Dent, 2010; Dolven & Chanlett-Avery, 2022).

The strong political and economic ties between Singapore and the United States have provided a solid foundation for enhancing people-to-people relations between the two countries. To facilitate greater interaction between their citizens, both the U.S. and Singapore have relaxed visa requirements. Singaporean citizens are eligible to enroll in the U.S. Global Entry program, while American citizens can apply for Singapore's Enhanced.

### **Implications for Southeast Asia's Regional Stability**

The relationship between Singapore and the United States is not merely a bilateral affair between two sovereign nations, but also one between an ASEAN member and a major partner of the Association. Therefore, any advancements in Singapore-US relations directly affect the broader ASEAN-US dynamic. From a security standpoint, Singapore's facilitation of a US military presence in Southeast Asia has played a pivotal role in supporting ASEAN's strategy of balancing relations with major powers, particularly in balancing ASEAN's ties with both the US and China. This positive trajectory in Singapore-US relations has encouraged even ASEAN members traditionally less aligned with the US, such as Malaysia, to strengthen their ties with the US. For example, both Indonesia and Malaysia elevated their relationships with the US to the level of strategic partnership in 2015.

A key contribution from Singapore to ASEAN-US relations is the initiation of the ASEAN-US Summit. Proposed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2008, this idea gained widespread support from ASEAN members and the US. ASEAN has long desired a high-level summit with the US,

acknowledging the increasing necessity of such interactions. Since the establishment of the ASEAN +3 cooperation mechanism in 1997, ASEAN had annual summits with Northeast Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, which caused difficulties in fully executing a balanced policy toward the US. Given its global stature as a superpower, the US has vital political, economic, and strategic interests in Southeast Asia. Indeed, resolving regional issues, especially security concerns, is not possible without active US participation. A summit with the US would offer ASEAN the opportunity to reinforce the significance of Southeast Asia on the US's radar, given that the region has not been a top priority in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. ASEAN countries also desire a stronger US presence to balance their relations with China, which many ASEAN members view as a long-term strategic threat.

On the U.S. side, hosting the ASEAN summit aligned with the broader "Rebalancing" strategy initiated under President Barack Obama, which aimed to reinforce American leadership and protect its strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. This strategy, often referred to as the "Pivot to Asia," emphasized the enhancement of

security alliances, engagement with multilateral institutions, and expansion of economic ties throughout Southeast Asia (Castro, 2013). Analysts have identified ASEAN as a critical component in this regional approach, reflecting both its geographic centrality and institutional relevance (Adelman, 2012).

The U.S. commitment to ASEAN was further institutionalized through high-level summits and cooperative frameworks that focused on areas such as education, science and technology, labor rights, counterterrorism, disarmament, and environmental sustainability. These initiatives marked a significant milestone in U.S.-ASEAN relations and laid the groundwork for continued collaboration on regional and global challenges (Dolven & Chanlett-Avery, 2022).

In addition to the above contents, the statement affirmed that the second ASEAN-US Summit will be held in 2010. By the end of 2013, the ASEAN-US Summit process had been institutionalized. This event marked the birth of a new ASEAN + 1 mechanism: the ASEAN + 1 US mechanism. This mechanism facilitated annual meetings between ASEAN and US leaders to discuss issues of mutual concern and to develop new cooperation plans. Based on the new legal and

institutional basis, ASEAN - US relations have developed rapidly during the tenure of President Obama. Total President Obama. At the 3rd ASEAN-US Summit held in November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, leaders decided to upgrade ASEAN partnership. - The US has upgraded to a Strategic Partnership. To implement that partnership, an Action Plan (2016-2020) has been approved. The plan focuses on five key areas including: Politics and security; Economy; Society and culture; Connectivity; Sustainable development.

Following the upgrade of relations, a special Summit hosted by President Obama was held in Sunnylands, California in February 2016. The Summit discussed on future cooperation and key principles guiding the relationship. On this occasion, the leaders adopted the Joint Statement of the Special Summit: the Sunnylands Declaration. After the Summit, many cooperative activities between ASEAN and the US have been promoted.

However, under the administration of President Donald Trump (2017-2020), ASEAN relations - The US has slowed down and is on a downward trend. Despite the loud statements about the Indo-Pacific Strategy made at the APEC Summit held in Hanoi in 2017, the US has not had any significant

activities in Southeast Asia to realize the above strategy. On the contrary, the Donald Trump administration has promoted activities to create more space for China to increase its influence, regional influence with the announcement of withdrawing from TPP. Until August 2018, the US still had not appointed an ambassador to ASEAN after the first nominee, Ms. KT McFarland, withdrew.

US President D.Trump also does not attend the ASEAN Summit held in Singapore at the end of 2018 as scheduled. The above moves by the US have made ASEAN and its member countries worried, especially in the context of China becoming more assertive in its activities in the East Sea and trying to attract ASEAN countries to support its new regional cooperation initiatives, especially the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative. In that situation, ASEAN countries are facing a difficult choice of either standing with the US or standing with China in the current Sino-US competition in Southeast Asia. Even Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong is also worried about such a choice. Speaking at the closing ceremony of the ASEAN Summit held in Singapore, on the evening of November 16, 2018, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned about " Situations that could lead to to the point

where ASEAN will have to choose one side or the other " and expressed " I hope that doesn't happen anytime soon" (Shambaugh, 2018)

To avoid having to choose between the US and China, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has sought to bring the US back to Southeast Asia. The renewal of the 1990 MOU is aimed at this purpose. In the diplomatic field, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has both criticized the instability in US policy towards Southeast Asia and called on the US to maintain its commitment to ASEAN. This goal has always been mentioned in joint statements between Singapore and the US during high-level exchanges between the two sides. Indeed, in the Joint Statement with President Donald Trump during Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to the US in 2016, "Both sides emphasized the importance of the US-ASEAN strategic partnership and the principles underpinning this relationship, as stated in the Sunnylands Declaration 2016" (Tan, 2011).

After the new US President Joe Biden took office (January 2021) and adjusted the policy towards Southeast Asia to restart the Rebalance strategy of his predecessor Obama with new approaches, Singapore welcomed



the above policy. Right before the US-ASEAN Special Summit held at the initiative of President Joe Biden in Washington DC in May 2022, the Singaporean Prime Minister went to visit to the US. His visit not only demonstrates Singapore's support for the new US policy towards ASEAN, but can also be seen as a pre-trip that Singapore voluntarily undertook to pave the way for the participation of other ASEAN leaders in this important event. Speaking at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, President Joe Biden affirmed "As we look to the future, Prime Minister Lee and I share a commitment to ASEAN - and the centrality of this region in all that we do. And I look forward to welcoming ASEAN leaders to Washington, DC, for a special summit this spring." (Hue, 2023) With the active participation of both Singapore and the United States, the second US-ASEAN Special Summit was a great success. At the Summit, the leaders of both sides decided to upgrade the relationship between the two sides to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, a level equal to the ASEAN-China relationship upgraded five months earlier.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that Singapore and the US not only contribute to joint activities in ASEAN - US

relations but are also important driving forces for the development of the above relationship.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Singapore-US relationship has grown significantly and achieved substantial milestones, with new areas of collaboration emerging alongside the upgrading and deepening of traditional partnerships. Trust between the two nations has continuously strengthened. Singapore's integration into the global economy, initiated under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's leadership, played a pivotal role in driving the growth of trade and investment ties between the two countries. Despite these positive developments, several challenges remain. These include geopolitical differences, economic disparities related to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and differences in human rights practices. These challenges are difficult to address, largely due to the divergent national interests of Singapore and the United States, with the latter's role as a global superpower. However, in contrast to the relationships between other small Southeast Asian nations and the US, the relationship between Singapore and the United States is distinct. Despite the inherent asymmetry, their ties are relatively balanced

and mutually beneficial. This uniqueness stems from Singapore's effective leveraging of its strategic position, skillful navigation of the China relationship, and its active role within ASEAN, which enables it to rally smaller countries to its side.

The Singapore-US partnership brings substantial benefits to both parties. Singapore gains tangible benefits, such as access to the US market, investment from US companies, and advanced defense technology. Intangible benefits include enhanced security due to the US military presence and a stronger position in its dealings with China. Similarly, the United States benefits from its relationship with Singapore, securing a vital presence in Southeast Asia and benefiting from trade and arms sales. The US also gains strategic advantages, with the Singaporean relationship acting as a catalyst for the US's broader relationships with other Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, the robust Singapore-US relations have provided significant momentum to ASEAN-US ties. Their collaboration led to the formalization of the ASEAN-US high-level cooperation mechanism in 2013, which has driven the development of ASEAN-US relations into a comprehensive strategic partnership since May 2022. As both Singapore and the United

States continue to foster this relationship, its implications for Southeast Asia will remain substantial in shaping the region's geopolitics and economic integration in the 21st century.

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