



# Pivotal Factors Shaping Singapore-US Relations in the First Two Decades of the 21st Century

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## Abstract

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the relationship between Singapore and the United States has undergone substantial development, marked by robust cooperation in security, economic affairs, and regional stability. Although Singapore is a small nation in both size and population, it has maintained a pivotal role in Southeast Asia, ensuring its relevance despite its geographical and strategic limitations. For the United States, Singapore has served as a key partner in advancing its regional interests, particularly in balancing China's influence in Asia. This research paper aims to explore the central factors shaping the bilateral relationship between Singapore and the U.S. throughout the first twenty years of the 21st century. The focus will be on examining changes in global and regional security dynamics, the role of U.S. foreign policy, and Singapore's approach to navigating its position between major powers. Additionally, it will analyze how trade agreements, diplomatic engagement, and defense cooperation have solidified the alliance. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of Singapore-U.S. relations and the strategic choices made by both nations in the context of an increasingly complex global landscape.

**Key words.** US, Singapore, Superpower, Partners, Global Affairs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 1965, and particularly after the end of the Cold War, Singapore has actively sought a comprehensive strategy to ensure national security and stability, as well as to protect its sovereignty and national interests. Singapore's policymakers have long been acutely aware that, as a small nation without inland seas, ensuring national security presents significant challenges. In the context of Southeast Asia, where major powers tend to expand and compete with one another, Singapore recognized that exploiting the tensions in relations between these powers could help maintain a balance of power.

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Singapore's approach has not been solely about minimizing the influence of great powers in the region but also about proactively developing cooperative relationships with these countries across various sectors, including politics, economics, and security. This strategy aims not only to sustain positive relations but also to prevent any power from overextending its influence, ultimately creating a balanced power dynamic in the region. Through skillfully managing international relationships, Singapore has sought to establish a secure and stable environment, safeguarding its national interests while contributing to the country's sustainable development. Recognizing its strategic geographical advantage, Singapore has established diplomatic ties with numerous countries, including the United States, a key partner. A critical factor behind Singapore's success is its ability to leverage the geopolitical and economic ambitions of the U.S. in Southeast Asia. This has allowed Singapore to effectively implement a strategy of "borrowing" political and military power from this superpower.

Singapore is not only a small nation but also a strategic hub in the global vision of the U.S. Through defense cooperation agreements, trade, and investment, Singapore has forged a close relationship with Washington. This partnership has enabled Singapore to access American resources and advanced technologies, fostering economic development and enhancing its defense capabilities.

However, this issue has not been systematically studied in Vietnam, particularly with regard to Singapore's behavior in its relationship with the U.S. An in-depth exploration of Singapore's foreign policy strategy could offer valuable lessons for Vietnam in its efforts to build and develop relationships with other great powers, while maintaining regional stability and security. The interaction between Singapore and the U.S. could serve as a model for other small nations in shaping their diplomatic strategies in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape.

As the global superpower, the U.S. is pursuing a new strategy to maintain its presence and influence in Southeast Asia. To achieve this goal, the U.S. needs strategic partners like Singapore, which Washington highly values for its significant geographical position. Singapore is not only a small nation but also a critical point controlling the Strait of Malacca—one of the most important shipping lanes in the world. The Strait holds immense global security significance, not only for Southeast Asia but also globally, as it serves as a crucial gateway for trade and the transport of oil. Controlling or facilitating access to this strait would benefit the U.S. and its regional allies. The stability and security of the Strait directly impact global supply chains and access to vital resources. Therefore, building strong ties with Singapore means the U.S. controls a key strategic chokepoint in today's geopolitical environment. Good relations with Singapore not only help the U.S. maintain its regional position but also create a robust network of partners, enhancing security and economic development for both sides. With its strategic location, Singapore has become an important bridge between major powers, asserting its role in maintaining peace and stability in both Southeast Asia and globally.

The Singapore-U.S. relationship is a prime example of a strategic partnership between a global superpower and a small island nation in Southeast Asia. While Singapore serves as a crucial security partner to the

U.S., it is not a formal ally. The policies and strategies that Singapore employs in its relations with the U.S. provide valuable lessons for policymakers in other nations, including Vietnam, in safeguarding and expanding their security space and developing their countries, particularly in relations with other great powers. Consequently, the study of the evolution of Singapore-U.S. relations is both scientifically and practically necessary and timely.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach to examine the evolution of Singapore-U.S. relations from 2004 to 2024. Primary sources such as official documents, government statements, and agreements between both nations, along with scholarly articles, are analyzed to identify key factors influencing their strategic partnership. Case study methodology is employed to investigate specific events, such as trade agreements and defense collaborations, as exemplars of diplomatic strategies. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks such as Realism and Small-State Diplomacy are utilized to contextualize Singapore's foreign policy and its balancing of major powers. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics in Singapore-U.S. relations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The relationship between Singapore and the United States over the past two decades is defined by various pivotal factors, including regional geopolitical dynamics, domestic ethnic challenges, and strategic national interests. [12] discusses the overarching principles that govern U.S.-China relations, emphasizing the pivotal role this great power competition plays in Southeast Asia, including Singapore's balancing act. In particular, [12] highlights Singapore's foreign policy, which has been instrumental in forging and maintaining its strategic relationship with the U.S. while navigating regional tensions, especially involving rising powers such as China.

Key economic and defense mechanisms in the bilateral relationship are explored in several works. [29] and Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024) underscore how Singapore and the U.S. have forged robust economic ties through agreements such as the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (USSFTA) signed in 2004. [7] and [17] also reflect U.S. initiatives to strengthen its Pacific engagement, which directly impact its relations with ASEAN countries, including Singapore. [10] provide a broader context of multilateral frameworks like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, highlighting economic collaborations that support both nations' growth.

On the defense front, [11] discuss Singapore's defense strategies in light of regional shifts, especially post-9/11, which marked a significant transformation in U.S. global policy, particularly regarding counter-terrorism. Similarly, [8] elaborates on the changing landscape of strategic alliances, emphasizing how Singapore's defense partnerships with the U.S. contribute to both regional stability and its own national

security. Furthermore, [9] discuss the evolving South China Sea dispute and its implications on regional security dynamics, which closely ties into U.S. strategic interests in the region.

Domestic factors such as Singapore's ethnic relations also play a key role.[4] investigate Singapore's successful management of ethnic diversity, which affects its foreign policy. This is particularly important when understanding its relations with both the U.S. and China, as Singapore's unique multicultural identity necessitates delicate diplomatic balancing.

Recent analyses such as [18] explore the shifting alliances in Southeast Asia in light of U.S.-China rivalry, which has spurred the formation of new strategic partnerships, particularly in security and economic spheres.[19] further deepens our understanding of China's role in ASEAN, offering crucial insight into the external pressures faced by Singapore in managing its ties with both global giants.

In conclusion, the literature underscores a multifaceted relationship between Singapore and the United States that spans economics, defense, and diplomatic efforts to adapt to the rapidly changing global order. As both nations continue to navigate emerging regional challenges, understanding these strategic dynamics provides essential insight into the factors that have shaped their interactions in the 21st century.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Political and Security Developments in the World and Region from 2004-2024 Transformations in the International Political and Security Environment**

Between 2004 and 2024, the political and security environment of the world underwent significant changes. Indeed, only nine months into the 21st century, the world was shaken by airstrikes carried out by international terrorist groups targeting the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, two symbols of U.S. power. For the U.S., the events of September 11 not only resulted in severe losses of lives and property but, more importantly, shattered the sense of invulnerability that the U.S. had once taken pride in. As a result, the fight against international terrorism became the foremost priority in U.S. foreign policy in the early years of the 21st century [8]. In order to successfully counter international terrorist forces, the U.S. gathered around itself countries with shared anti-terrorism interests. The world was divided into two opposing sides based on whether or not they supported the U.S.-led war on terror. With this viewpoint, in March 2003, the U.S. unilaterally launched a war against Iraq, believing that the country was harboring international terrorist groups, despite opposition from other members of the United Nations Security Council [3].

In retaliation, international terrorist groups attempted to expand their areas of operation, and Southeast Asia became one of their key priorities due to the region's large Muslim population and ongoing ethnic and religious conflicts in some countries. Some governments in the region were also traditionally pro-U.S., making Southeast Asia an ideal location for al-Qaeda to open a second front against the U.S.

Terrorist activities continuously unfolded across several Southeast Asian nations, especially in Indonesia, the four southern provinces of Thailand, and Mindanao in the Philippines. Beyond land-based activities, terrorist groups also intensified operations in the Malacca Strait, a vital maritime route connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans. As Southeast Asia became the second-largest operational theater for international terrorist groups, it raised concerns for Singapore. Despite efforts by the government to establish a unified, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nation, Singapore's longstanding pro-U.S. position put it at risk of becoming a target of international terrorist forces.

The second major transformation in the international political and security environment of the early 21st century was the changing relationships among the world's major powers, particularly in Southeast Asia. Entering the 21st century, relations among major powers continued to stabilize. However, the trend of power competition between major nations gradually became more pronounced than the earlier trends of conciliation and cooperation in the first decade after the end of the Cold War. The reason behind this shift was the rise of China and the revival of Russia [19].

The rise of China and the resurgence of Russia have changed the political-security landscape of the world. The unipolar order, with the U.S. as the sole superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, came to an end [14]. A new order of one superpower and multiple great powers began to emerge and became increasingly defined. This reality led to concerns for the U.S. and Western countries. Washington saw Russia and, in particular, China as potential rivals capable of challenging America's position as the world's sole superpower in the coming decades. To prevent this possibility, the U.S. joined forces with the EU and Japan to contain the rise of both Russia and China. In Europe, taking advantage of historic animosities toward the Soviet Union and present-day Russia, the U.S. and EU attracted former Eastern and Central European socialist nations into NATO to narrow Russia's strategic space on the Eurasian continent. For its part, the EU also opened its doors to these countries despite the possibility that their economies might create challenges for the union. Following the EU enlargement in 2004, its borders had expanded close to Russia's borders.

To the East, the U.S. further strengthened its relationship with Japan through the signing of the "Joint Declaration on Alliance in the 21st Century" between U.S. President Bill Clinton and Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto on April 17, 1996. According to this declaration, the scope of the U.S.-Japan alliance was expanded to cover a vast region from the Korean Peninsula to Taiwan, the Philippines, and the South China Sea. The military cooperation between the two countries also extended beyond Japan's defense to prepare for security threats across the region. NATO's expansion eastward and the upgrading of the U.S.-Japan security alliance created additional catalysts for closer ties between China and Russia. In line with efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation, in June 2001, Russia and China established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO's activities have steadily expanded, transforming the organization from one aimed at combating cross-border terrorism to a political and economic cooperation body led by China and Russia.

In recent years, the competition among major powers has intensified, particularly on the Eurasian continent. To counter the threat of encirclement from NATO's southwest as the organization accepted Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, Russia launched a special military operation aimed at forcing Ukraine to abandon its NATO membership intentions. To safeguard its security and territorial integrity, Ukraine called for NATO's assistance. Russia's special military operation against Ukraine opened the opportunity for NATO to openly oppose Russia. Under the pretext of helping Ukraine defend its independence and sovereignty, NATO, led by the U.S., increased weapon and ammunition aid to Kyiv while imposing economic sanctions on Russia. The West's hostility has caused Russia to draw closer to China, with growing ties between the two Eastern powers, not only economically but also in military and defense cooperation [15]. The escalating political-security situation globally since the beginning of the 21st century, particularly since the early 2020s, has created the risk of a new Cold War on a global scale. World security is more uncertain than ever [1]. The situation and the behavior of major powers towards smaller countries, through the U.S.'s Iraq War and Russia's actions in Ukraine, have shaped Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's perceptions of international politics. In a lecture on Singapore's foreign policy at the Jarajtnam School in November 2015, Prime Minister Lee emphasized, "Power will determine which country prevails and which one will set the agenda. Politics of strength has never disappeared, even if it doesn't completely resemble the law of the jungle" [12]. This harsh reality in international politics led Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to state, "Small countries like us must constantly ask:

### **Southeast Asia Situation**

Entering the 21st century, the political, security, and integration situation in Southeast Asia has undergone many new developments. Notable changes in this region include:

#### **i) Intensifying competition for influence and interests among major powers, especially between the U.S. and China**

Due to its geostrategic position, Southeast Asia continues to be a battleground for the influence and interests of major powers, especially the U.S. and China. After over a decade of limited focus on Southeast Asia, in the early years of the 21st century, the U.S. turned its attention back to this region. The goals of the U.S. in returning to Southeast Asia were: to involve Southeast Asian countries in the U.S.-led War on Terror and to contain China's influence in the region. To achieve these objectives, the U.S. reactivated military alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, while strengthening military ties with Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Along with bolstering political-security relationships, the U.S. introduced several initiatives to boost economic ties with ASEAN.

U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia fundamentally shifted when President Barack Obama initiated the "Pivot to Asia" policy [7]. The aim of this strategic shift was: to enhance the role and maintain the leadership of the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region; and to protect American interests in the region. To achieve this, the U.S. established a series of action principles, such as: strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening relations with emerging countries, including China; participating in regional multilateral organizations; expanding trade and investment; building a solid and comprehensive military foundation; and promoting democracy and human rights [17].

In the U.S.'s rebalancing strategy, Southeast Asia plays a significant role. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton viewed ASEAN as the “foundation for the emerging structure in the region” [7]. Due to its importance, Southeast Asia became the focus of the U.S.'s rebalancing policy. To implement this policy, the U.S. strengthened security relations with Thailand, the Philippines, and other long-standing U.S. allies in the region, in order to counter China’s influence in these two countries [2]. Relations with countries seen as closer to China, such as Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, have also been actively promoted. Regarding the South China Sea issue, the U.S. policy underwent significant adjustments. Instead of maintaining a neutral stance in the territorial disputes, at the ARF meeting in Hanoi in July 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is a U.S. national interest. The U.S. position on the South China Sea is: to respect freedom of navigation; to resolve disputes peacefully; to maintain free trade; to negotiate the COC and resolve territorial claims based on legal territorial claims.

In implementing its new Southeast Asia policy, the U.S. promoted comprehensive cooperation with ASEAN. The first and most significant manifestation was the organization of the first ASEAN-U.S. summit in late 2009. By the end of 2013, the ASEAN-U.S. summit process had been institutionalized. Based on this legal and institutional framework, the ASEAN-U.S. relationship has continued to grow stronger. This relationship was elevated to a Strategic Partnership at the third summit in November 2015 in Kuala Lumpur. Following this upgrade, a special summit hosted by President Obama was held in Sunnylands, California, in February 2016. The summit discussed future cooperation and key principles guiding the relationship. During this event, leaders adopted the Sunnylands Declaration [17].

In addition to bilateral relations with ASEAN, the U.S. continued to participate and contribute to ASEAN's multilateral cooperation initiatives. In July 2009, the U.S. signed the TAC, which paved the way for U.S. participation in the EAS led by ASEAN [16]. In 2011, along with Russia, the U.S. officially joined the EAS and made significant contributions to the activities of this process. The U.S. also actively participated in ASEAN/PMC, ARF, and ADMM +. The U.S.'s growing presence in Southeast Asia aligns with ASEAN’s strategy of balancing the influence of major powers in the region since the end of the Cold War. Therefore, ASEAN and its member states welcomed the U.S.'s positive engagement.

These new developments in U.S.-ASEAN relations raised concerns for China. In order to maintain its economic and political influence in Southeast Asia, China sought to convince ASEAN of its peaceful rise and the benefits that rise could bring to ASEAN. On the other hand, China also decided to take bold steps to further strengthen ties with ASEAN. Over the two years (2002-2003), China signed a series of significant documents with ASEAN, including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement between ASEAN and China, which set the goal of establishing the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area; it also signed the TAC and the Strategic Partnership Declaration between ASEAN and China (October 2003) [9]. Following these cooperation agreements, China actively helped ASEAN build the ASEAN Community, supported

ASEAN's central role in the evolving regional security structure, and actively participated in ASEAN-led multilateral cooperation mechanisms, especially in the ASEAN+3 process [25]. Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China has intensified its competition for influence with the U.S. in Southeast Asia. China has continuously introduced new initiatives to help ASEAN member states overcome the difficulties they face in their socio-economic development. One such initiative was the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the implementation of Belt and Road Initiative projects in Southeast Asian countries [10]. The ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement was also upgraded and came into effect in 2019. As a result, trade and investment relations between ASEAN and China have grown strongly. In 2012, China became ASEAN's largest trading partner [6]. By 2021, ASEAN became China's largest trading partner. Other forms of cooperation between the two sides have deepened and yielded substantial results [5]. However, alongside these friendly and cooperative activities, China continues its efforts to realize its ambitions in the South China Sea. Not only did China occupy additional islands in the Spratly Islands, which the Philippines claimed sovereignty over in 2014, but it also continued to reclaim islands and reefs it had taken from Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea, constructing military airports and ports to militarize the South China Sea. All these activities have created a threat to maritime safety on international shipping routes through the South China Sea. Therefore, despite the robust development of economic relations between ASEAN and China, which is an important driver for the economic growth of Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, skepticism about China's motives for the region continues among Southeast Asian leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Because of this, even though it has made significant efforts, China has not been able to fully align ASEAN with its interests, even when the U.S., under President Donald Trump (2016-2020), once again downplayed Southeast Asia. U.S.-China competition in the region heated up again when President Joe Biden took office (1/2021). Just five months after China upgraded its relationship with ASEAN to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (12/2021), in May 2022, U.S.-ASEAN relations were also upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. However, due to distractions from the Russia-Ukraine war and domestic issues, the U.S. has not made major moves to implement this upgraded relationship yet [18]. The instability in U.S. policy towards Southeast Asia has caused concern among many leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. This instability could disrupt the balance of influence between major powers, the most important factor for peace and security in Southeast Asia. Countries in the region may be forced to choose sides between the U.S. or China, a choice that most Southeast Asian nations, especially Singapore, never want to make. U.S.-China rivalry in Southeast Asia has greatly influenced other major powers that have significant economic and political interests in the region. Since the early 21st century, Japan, India, the EU, and Russia have all adjusted their policies towards Southeast Asia to engage more with ASEAN and thus protect and expand their interests in the region. The new dynamism of the U.S., China, and other major powers has stirred the political and economic environment in Southeast Asia. Never before has the region seen such dramatic changes since the beginning of the 21st century.

## **ii) New Advances in Regional Integration in Southeast Asia**



The regional integration process in Southeast Asia, launched in 1992, has yielded positive results after 10 years of developing the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). However, AFTA has yet to break through the barriers in intra-ASEAN trade, which all ASEAN member states were hoping for. Meanwhile, China's economic competition in ASEAN's traditional markets (the U.S., EU, Japan) has continued to grow. In the security field, although the risk of war and conflict has decreased, non-traditional security issues have emerged, even more strongly than in the first decade after the Cold War ended. Separatist terrorism has continued to rise in Southern Thailand, Mindanao in the Philippines, and Aceh in Indonesia. Other countries in Southeast Asia are also at risk of facing such threats. Along with the threat of terrorism, Southeast Asian countries also face several other non-traditional security issues, especially new diseases caused by climate change [20]. Between 2003 and 2006, these countries endured two major outbreaks of avian influenza. In this context, relations between some ASEAN countries have become tense 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 through the construction of the ASEAN Community, which is based on three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). APSC, AEC, and ASCC "will be tightly interconnected and mutually reinforced in efforts to achieve peace, stability, and prosperity in Southeast Asia." Building the ASEAN Community aligns with the interests of Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore. The ASEAN Community, once successfully built, will transform ASEAN into a community of nations connected in dynamic partnerships. This community will enhance regional resilience and create internal balance to successfully pursue ASEAN's policy of balancing relations with major powers.

### **The Situation of Singapore as It Entered the 21st Century**

With an area of approximately 719.1 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 5,997,037 as of August 24, 2023, Singapore is a small country. Despite being one of the world's most developed economies, ranking high globally with a per capita GDP that could reach 103,181 USD in 2023 and placing second globally by PPP (Lim, J.H. & Tan, 2023), its economy is highly vulnerable due to its heavy dependence on external resources. Singapore has almost no natural resources, with most raw materials needing to be imported, even drinking water. Annually, Singapore has to import food to meet domestic needs. In 2001, while other ASEAN economies began to recover from the 1997-1998 financial crisis, Singapore's economy entered its deepest recession since gaining independence in 1965. The economic growth rate in 2001 was -2%, and foreign trade dropped by 9.4% compared to 2000. In 2002, thanks to global economic improvements, Singapore's economy rebounded slightly. However, the unemployment rate consistently increased, reaching a record 4.8% in September 2002, surpassing the 4.3% unemployment rate seen during the Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998. In the first nine months of 2002, 2,710 businesses went bankrupt, marking the highest number since 1985 [11].

To recover its economy, in 2002, the Singapore government implemented several adjustment measures, including: adjusting its economic development strategy; amending tax laws; promoting the service sector, making it a growth driver; adjusting wage policies to increase competitiveness; promoting trade liberalization and economic integration within the region, and maintaining export growth. These measures

aimed to revive the economy, enhance the competitiveness of Singapore's goods in regional and global markets. After coming into power, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong continued these development directions. However, implementing these policies wasn't simple. Singapore's economy is export-oriented, with the United States being its key export market. Therefore, the stability and further expansion of the U.S. market is one of the most important factors for the stability and growth of Singapore's economy.

In the field of political security, from 2004 to 2024, Singapore has not faced any direct threats internally or externally. However, the potential for instability still remains. Although Singapore has a multi-party system, the People's Action Party (PAP), led by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, has been in power continuously since independence. This reality has led to dissatisfaction among other political parties. Moreover, Singapore's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural situation also carries the risk of conflict. The Chinese are the largest ethnic group in Singapore, comprising nearly three-quarters of the population, and they control the main economic channels in the country. The biggest companies in Singapore are owned by the Chinese, and political power is largely in the hands of the Chinese, represented by the Lee family. The Malays are the first group to settle in Singapore and are the second-largest ethnic group. Malay is the local spoken language, closely related to the language of Malaysia. Most Malays are Muslim and primarily engaged in business. They enjoy political and social rights equal to other ethnic groups in Singapore. However, in practice, their economic and political status is lower than that of the Chinese. Other ethnic groups include Indians, Europeans, Arabs, and some smaller communities [4].

The ethnic and cultural diversity is one of the greatest challenges in building a united Singapore, independent yet diverse. Historically, Singapore has witnessed three ethnic conflicts in 1950, 1964, and 1969. These conflicts were all rooted in clashes of interest between the Chinese and Malay communities in the country [22].

To successfully build a sovereign, prosperous, and unified nation that thrives in diversity, the governing governments in Singapore have successfully implemented many policies focusing on religion and ethnic harmony. Since 1969, ethnic conflicts have not reoccurred in Singapore, but tensions between the Chinese and Malay communities have simmered beneath the surface. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, relations between Singapore and Malaysia became strained due to territorial disputes. If not managed properly, these tensions between the two countries could easily transform into inter-ethnic conflicts within Singapore [23].

### **The Need to Strengthen Cooperation with the United States**

Analyzing the changes in global, regional, and domestic politics, security, and economics, as well as Singapore's internal situation entering the 21st century, it is clear that from 2001 onwards, Singapore has faced many opportunities for development but also significant challenges.

In terms of security, the competition for influence and interests between major powers globally and regionally creates an opportunity for ASEAN, with Singapore as a key member, to implement strategies balancing the interests of Southeast Asian countries, thereby maintaining a stable political-security

environment in the region. For Singapore, regional stability plays a crucial role, as former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew emphasized: "Singapore will only prosper if there is international order, peace, regional stability, and growth instead of war and conflict" [30]. This stability serves as a foundation for Singapore to strengthen trade relations and attract foreign investment, both of which are vital for the country's growth and prosperity.

However, stability in Southeast Asia can only be created and maintained through the continuous and stable presence of the United States. From Singapore's perspective, the U.S. acts as a counterbalance to China's increasing influence in the region. Therefore, Singapore's need for cooperation with the U.S. primarily stems from its desire to establish political-security stability in Southeast Asia, a key element for the nation's own security and development.

Additionally, the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia is viewed by Singapore as essential for ensuring maritime security in the South China Sea, where Singapore has vital interests. Singapore's prosperity depends on its imports and exports, all of which are transported via international maritime routes passing through the South China Sea. The increasingly aggressive actions of China in the South China Sea threaten the region's maritime safety. Therefore, Singapore seeks active U.S. involvement in South China Sea issues, believing that only the U.S. has the capacity to constrain China's activities. This explains why Singapore's leaders have welcomed adjustments in U.S. policy under President Barack Obama regarding the South China Sea and have openly supported the 2016 PCA ruling in the Philippines' arbitration case against China's Nine-Dash Line claims [30].

In terms of national defense, Singapore has a significant need for cooperation. Despite actively procuring modern weaponry and modernizing its military, Singapore's military strength cannot compare with neighboring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, which have numerous historical disputes with Singapore. Doubts about China's long-term intentions toward Singapore further push the country to strengthen its defense capabilities. As a result, in addition to relying on the U.S. for security, Singapore requires American cooperation for military training and advanced weaponry procurement.

Economically, although Singapore's economic ties with China were growing stronger at the start of the 21st century, the importance of the United States to Singapore's economic prosperity has not diminished. U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) remains a significant driver for Singapore's economic growth. The U.S. market continues to be a key destination for Singapore's exports of goods and services. Maintaining and expanding this market is a substantial economic benefit for Singapore.

Given the political, security, and economic dynamics on the global and regional stage, Singapore is keen on further U.S. involvement in the region. As [13] remarked in 2007, "Singapore expects greater U.S. engagement in this part of the world..." [31]. This reflects the multifaceted interest Singapore has in fostering a deeper relationship with the United States to ensure its continued stability and prosperity on all fronts.

### **Strategic Interests of Singapore and the United States in Bilateral Relations**

The strategic interests of Singapore and the United States in their bilateral relationship are diverse, focusing on security, economic cooperation, and regional stability.

#### **Bilateral Security Cooperation:**

Both countries prioritize security cooperation, encompassing several areas:

- Border security: Efforts to enhance border security against illegal activities.
- Maritime security: Cooperation to ensure safety and security on maritime routes, particularly in the bustling shipping lanes of Southeast Asia.
- Military readiness: Joint military exercises and training to strengthen readiness and interoperability between their forces.
- Counterterrorism: Collaborative efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism.
- Cybersecurity: Initiatives to safeguard critical infrastructure and information systems from cyber threats.
- Non-proliferation of weapons: Joint actions to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction (U.S.-Singapore Relations).

#### **Economic Relations:**

The U.S. and Singapore have a close economic relationship, characterized by the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that facilitates trade and investment, bringing benefits to both economies.

- Investment opportunities: Singapore serves as a central hub for U.S. companies seeking to penetrate the Asian market, while U.S. investments contribute significantly to Singapore's economy.

#### **Regional Stability:**

Both countries are committed to maintaining stability in the Asia-Pacific region.

- ASEAN commitment: Singapore plays a vital role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the U.S. seeks to strengthen relations with ASEAN through Singapore as a strategic partner. These efforts include collaborations to address challenges posed by regional powers and non-state actors.

The strategic interests of Singapore and the United States in their bilateral relationship are deeply intertwined, focusing on security cooperation, economic partnership, and regional stability. This relationship is crucial for both countries as they navigate the complexities of the geopolitical landscape in Asia.

### **Policies of Singapore and the United States in Bilateral Relations**

The policies of Singapore and the United States in their bilateral relations are characterized by a comprehensive approach, which includes economic cooperation, defense collaboration, and participation in emerging global challenges.

#### **Economic Policies:**

The United States-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (USSFTA), which entered into force in 2004, is the first bilateral trade agreement that the United States signed with an Asian country. This agreement has facilitated strong flows of trade and investment, supporting over a quarter of a million jobs in the U.S. and benefiting both economies by enhancing competitiveness and prosperity.

Partnership for Growth and Innovation : Introduced in 2021, this initiative aims to strengthen cooperation between Singaporean and U.S. companies in areas such as the digital economy, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and healthcare.

**Defense and Security Policies :**

Under a 2005 agreement, the U.S. recognized Singapore as a Major Security Cooperation Partner, establishing the foundation for a broad and deep defense relationship [26].

Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement : Signed in 2015, this agreement outlined areas of cooperation including biological security, cyber defense, and humanitarian support. Regular training exercises between Singapore's Armed Forces and U.S. servicemen enhance interoperability and readiness [26].

### **People-to-People Exchanges in Education and Culture :**

Initiatives such as the U.S.-Singapore Summer Exchange Scholarship Program foster ties between young leaders from both countries [26].

### **Reliable Travel Programs :**

These programs facilitate travel between the citizens of both nations, strengthening bilateral relations [26].

### **Emerging Cooperation Areas :**

- U.S.-Singapore Climate Partnership : Launched in 2021, it focuses on cooperation in climate change response and sustainable development.
- Cybersecurity Initiatives : The inaugural U.S.-Singapore Cybersecurity Dialogue in 2022 established a framework for ongoing cooperation in cybersecurity.
- Emerging Technology Dialogue : Initiated in 2023, this dialogue aims to promote collaboration in critical areas like artificial intelligence and biotechnology [26].

The policies of Singapore and the United States in bilateral relations reflect a commitment to mutually beneficial cooperation across various fields, including trade, defense, and emerging global challenges. This multilateral partnership is vital for both countries as they navigate the increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although Singapore is a very small country in terms of size and population, when considering economic factors such as GDP per capita and military potential, it is not a small country in the conventional sense. The relationship between Singapore and the United States represents the connection between a small Southeast Asian nation and the world's sole superpower. In theory, the relationship between these two entities is built on basic concepts in the field of international relations, particularly in the context of relations between small and large states. These theories include Power Balancing, Double-Edged Defense, and Beneficial Assimilation. These not only explain how Singapore maintains its position on the global stage but also highlight the important role the country plays in shaping regional and global policies.

From a practical standpoint, the relationship between Singapore and the United States under Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has primarily been based on analyzing the changes in the international and regional political, security, and economic environment. Key shifts in this environment include: the groundbreaking development of international terrorism, notably through the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. This attack revealed the danger posed by non-traditional security challenges to global security and stability.

Another important shift is the changing relationship between major powers: from cooperation in the 1990s to competition and cooperation. The reasons behind this transformation lie in the powerful rise of China and Russia's resurgence under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. The emergence of these two Eastern powers, coupled with the development of other major nations, has shifted the world order from unipolarity to multipolarity, with the United States remaining the dominant pole.

There have also been significant changes in the political-security environment in Southeast Asia. Notably, the unprecedented rise in separatist terrorism in some countries in the region and the intensifying influence competition, particularly between China and the United States, have created both opportunities and challenges for the security and development of Southeast Asia, and Singapore in particular. To adapt to the changing international and regional environment, ASEAN has decided to elevate regional integration, constructing 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).

As a small country situated at the heart of Southeast Asia, Singapore possesses considerable strategic resources. However, its security and development remain vulnerable due to its heavy dependence on external security and economic forces. Its ethnic and cultural diversity also poses challenges to domestic security. In this context, Singapore requires peaceful, friendly, and cooperative relations with major powers, particularly the United States. Therefore, since becoming Singapore's Prime Minister in 2004, Lee Hsien Loong has continued to regard the United States as a crucial security partner, essential in helping Singapore maintain peace in Southeast Asia, achieve economic prosperity, strengthen its defense, and advance in science and technology.

The strategic relationship between Singapore and the United States is diverse, focusing on security cooperation, economic partnership, and regional stability. Security cooperation includes joint efforts on border security, maritime safety, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and weapons non-proliferation. Economically, the U.S.-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (USSFTA) promotes trade and investment. Both nations emphasize regional stability, with Singapore playing a key role within ASEAN. Their policies, including defense agreements and initiatives on climate change, cybersecurity, and emerging technologies, reflect robust cooperation and mutual commitment, playing a crucial role in shaping the strategy between the two nations amidst an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.

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