



## **Singapore's Response to China-US Rivalry in Southeast Asia Under PM Lee Hsien Loong**

**Truong Thi Hue<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Abstract***

*Singapore has chosen a smart and flexible approach in the competition between China and the US in Southeast Asia. This country has built a close relationship with both sides, aiming to maintain balance and take advantage of benefits from both countries. Singapore acts as a bridge and reliable intermediary, participating in negotiations between China and the US. Singapore also strengthens economic cooperation with other regional countries and international partners, to diversify economic resources and reduce dependence on one side in competition. With its political and economic stability, Singapore has become a reliable partner and important voice in Southeast Asia. Participating in international forums and discussions, Singapore offers its own perspective and contributes to shaping policies and decisions in the competition between China and the US. As a bridge and trusted intermediary, Singapore takes advantage of benefits from both sides and contributes to the stability and development of the region.*

**Keywords:** *China, US, South Asia, Economic resources, Singapore*

### **Singapore's perception of China - US competition**

In general, Singaporean leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, have a positive view of the competition between China and the US in Southeast Asia. According to them, the engagement of major powers with Southeast Asia is necessary because otherwise, this area may become the exclusive sphere of influence of a certain power. Such a scenario is unfavorable for Southeast Asia. The history of war and conflict in Southeast Asia from 1954 to present has shown that. Therefore, Singapore's leaders welcome the active engagement of major countries, especially China and the US. From Singapore's perspective, China's active involvement will create favorable conditions for ASEAN countries as well as Singapore to exploit trade and investment cooperation opportunities from China from the beginning of the 21st century until now. Singapore's exported goods as well as those of other countries in Southeast Asia have found a large consumer market. Singaporean investors have another attractive investment area to expand their business. Assessing those opportunities, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that the rise of China "brings huge opportunities for all.". To prove his point of view, Mr. Lee gave specific evidence. According to him, "China is already the major economic partner of many countries in East Asia. Trade is growing both ways - imports as well as exports. Greater China (Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) is amongst the top five trading partners for almost every Asian country, including Japan, South Korea and Singapore. China is the fastest growing source of tourists, with growing purchasing power and the desire to travel further. And China is starting to generate outward investments itself. In Singapore alone there are 1,500 Chinese companies. There are 77 Chinese companies

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<sup>1</sup> Duy Tan University, Da Nang, Vietnam



listed on the Singapore Exchange. Overall, the Asian countries see China's emergence as a major plus. They are striving to strengthen their economic ties with China, and to benefit from the great opportunities opening up. China's growth is fostering regional economic integration and producing a new division of labour among the countries" (The Future Of Asia, 2005).

However, along with creating development opportunities, China's economic rise also poses new challenges to the economic development of ASEAN countries, including Singapore. With the advantage of a large market, cheap labor costs and incentives that the Chinese government gives to foreign investors, China has also become a major competitor of ASEAN countries, in general, and Singapore. , in particular about FDI. Speaking about this challenge, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasized, "However, China is also a formidable competitor. It is developing a broad range of capabilities. It competes with developed countries in R&D and high end manufacturing, and with developing countries in low cost, labour intensive operations. So whether it is the hard disk drive industry in Singapore, textiles and garments in the US or Europe, or automobiles in Japan and Thailand, industries all round the world will come under strong pressure." (New York Time, 2000). The challenges from the rise of China were also discussed by Lee Kuan Yew. According to him, "China will be a formidable player in the region. No combination of other East Asian economies – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, ASEAN – will be able to balance it."

In terms of security, the increase in China's military power causes concern for the international community in general and Southeast Asia in particular. Southeast Asian countries fear that China could use its growing military power to monopolize the South China Sea. The Chinese government's adoption of the Ordinance on Territorial Waters and Contiguous Areas in 1992 and the Chinese military's occupation of Mischief Island, which the Philippines claimed in 1994, provided reasons for this concern. As a country oriented towards export-oriented economic development, Singapore's economic security is very vulnerable due to its heavy dependence on trade with the outside world through the cargo transport route in the South China Sea. Therefore, maritime safety in the South China Sea is a vital interest of Singapore. Assessing that importance, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong affirmed: "...the South China Sea along with the Strait of Malacca are "two important arteries" connecting Singapore to the world. Ships must pass through one of the two." "With both arteries, if one is blocked, you will die." Therefore, according to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, "the important thing for Singapore is the dispute in the area." This sign does not affect the freedom of navigation at sea and in the air of ships and air vehicles" (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 2024). Thus, from an economic perspective, the rise of China brings Singapore both opportunities and challenges. From a security perspective, the rise of China is a big challenge for this island nation. With such a view, Singapore welcomes China's rise, encourages China to engage more in the region, and seeks ways to overcome the challenges that rise may pose to it.

In that search, Singapore looks to America. Singaporean leaders consider the US an important partner in ensuring security and promoting development in Southeast Asia. Speaking about the importance of the US to regional security and stability, Prime Minister



Lee Hsien Loong has repeatedly emphasized that the US continues to play an important role in the stability and prosperity of Asia (Leong, 2024). The positive view on America's role in this continent continued to be reaffirmed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his speech at the Shangri-La Forum, held in Singapore on May 29, 2015 "The U.S. remains the dominant Pacific power. The Pacific Command and the U.S. 7th Fleet are a powerful force in being, and a key factor for peace and stability in the region. America's core interest in Asia has not changed and that is a stable region that is open to do business with all countries and a regional order that enables all major powers to engage constructively in Asia. America has played this benign role in Asia since the War. Its presence is welcomed by the many regional countries which have benefited from it, including Singapore" (Tan, S. S, 2024). Prime Minister 's Department Lee Hsien Loong appreciates the US role in Southeast Asia because Singapore is concerned about the nature of China's rise and the possibility that it could disrupt regional stability. For Singaporee, political stability in Southeast Asia is extremely important to the country's security and development. Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew himself publicly asserted that Singapore would progress " only if there is international order and peace." and regional stability and growth instead of war and conflict ( Lee Kuan Yew, 2008). Stability in Southeast Asia will create opportunities for Singapore to attract foreign trade and investment which is a vital premise for the country's continued economic development because Singapore small in size and of limited strategic weight. Not only highly appreciating the role of the US in security and stability in Southeast Asia, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also attaches special importance to the role of the US in the economic development of ASEAN, in general, and Singapore, in particular (Tan, S. S,2004). Acknowledging China's increasingly important role in ASEAN's economic development, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said, "The Americans have many interests in the region. Their investments are substantial. In terms of impact, their investments – FDI – are much stronger than China's, even though China is currently investing more abroad. Overall, the US is not as big a trading partner as China, but in reality, the majority of trade with China is ultimately routed to the US (through intermediate goods). So economic relations are very important " (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 2024). Because of the importance of the US to the security and development of Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was very concerned when he saw instability in US policy towards Southeast Asia. In his statements, he not only emphasized America's interests in this region but also did not hesitate to criticize the United States when he noticed that America had reduced its attention to Southeast Asia. In an interview with Times Magazine on September 4, 2016, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong openly criticized the US:

"Your standing goes down with many countries around the world. Your opponents as well as your friends will say, "You talked about the strategic rebalance, you talked about developing your relationships. You can move aircraft carriers around. But what are the aircraft carriers in support of"? It has to be deeper economic and broad relationships" (Singapore, 2024). He also did not hesitate to compare China's and America's approaches to Southeast Asia when he said, "You do not do things which the Chinese do. The Chinese go around with lollipops in their pockets. They have aid, they have friendship deals, they build you a Prime Minister's office or President's office, or Parliament House or Foreign



Ministry. For them, trade is an extension of their foreign policy." "You do not do these retail items. The one big thing which you have done is to settle the TPP, which Obama has done. It shows that you are serious, that you are prepared to deepen the relationship and that you are putting a stake here which you will have an interest in upholding. Now, let's say you cannot deliver on the TPP. After you have gotten Vietnam to join, after you have gotten Japan to join, after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made very difficult arrangements on agriculture, cars, sugar and dairy. Now you say, "I walk away, that I do not believe in this deal." How can anybody believe in you anymore?" The above statements of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on the involvement of China and the US regarding Southeast Asia show that Singapore is not too concerned about the competition between these two large countries in Southeast Asia. Because, the more they compete with each other, the more both China and the US become more involved with Southeast Asia. That engagement benefits the security and development of Southeast Asia in general and Singapore in particular. What Singapore is concerned about is that China-US competition could lead to fierce conflict between these two powers, forcing countries in the region to have to choose sides. Speaking at the closing session of the Summit ASEAN meeting in Singapore, on the evening of November 16, 2018, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned about "Situations may come where ASEAN will have to choose one side or the other" and expressed "I hope that does not happen early (Jamrisko, Koutsoukis, 2024). Faced with such a possibility, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warns "Our road ahead will not be easy. The relationship between the US and China is unlikely to improve anytime soon. Furthermore, miscalculations or mishaps could easily make things worse." much worse"(Nguyen, 2024). The miscalculations mentioned above by the Singapore Prime Minister are not only to remind ASEAN and its member countries but also to the US and China. According to him, "America should not be under the illusion that pressure can lead to the collapse of the Chinese Communist Party. If the US insists that these countries have to choose which side to take, the US may not like the results. As for China, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong warned that "China can no longer act as a developing country but must take responsibility for protecting and supporting the global system." To avoid a potentially catastrophic geopolitical dispute, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called for " America and China to have the art of management, steadfastness and perseverance."

### **Singapore's response to China - US competition**

With a positive and cautious perception of China-US competition in Southeast Asia, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's cabinet's response to that competition is: to engage and promote balanced cooperation with both China and the US, and actively contribute to promoting ASEAN's regional integration.

*Engage and promote balanced relations with both China and the US, but still maintain an independent and self-reliant foreign policy*

*Promote relations with China but steadfastly oppose China's ambitions in the South China Sea*



The policy of engagement with China has been pursued by Singapore since the first signs of the country's rise appeared. That policy is aimed at the following two goals: First, engagement with China to create favorable conditions for Singapore businesses to exploit economic benefits in China. Second, through engagement, encourage China to play a constructive, responsible role in the region. Implementing the above policy, Singapore has actively promoted relations with the People's Republic of China in all fields.

*Regarding political and diplomatic relations:* Since establishing official diplomatic relations with China (October 3, 1990), Singapore has regularly conducted high-level visits to this country.<sup>2</sup> That activity has been promoted since entering the 21st century until now. After becoming Prime Minister of Singapore (August 2004), on October 25, 2005, Mr. Lee Hsien Loong made a 7-day visit to China. The main purpose of the visit is to discuss a bilateral FTA between Singapore and China that previous Prime Minister Go Chok Tong proposed during his visit to China in November 2003. Accompanying Mr. Lee Hsien Loong was also 40 large enterprises. They came to China to look for investment opportunities in Tianjin, Dalian... After that visit, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also made several other visits to China. In 2015, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the birth of the Republic of Singapore and the 25th anniversary of Singapore-China relations, the two countries conducted top-level visits. Singapore President Tony Tan Keng Yam visited China in July 2015. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Singapore in early November 2015. During that visit, the two sides agreed to upgrade their relationship to the level of a comprehensive cooperative partnership that would develop over time. The upgrade will open up many opportunities for cooperation and enhance coordination in regional and global issues. Also during that visit, Singapore and China signed eight Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) and agreements, including exchanging letters on officially launching negotiations to upgrade the China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (CSFTA), signed in 2009, the Agreement to launch government projects with the third government and agreements on educational cooperation, urban management, and cooperation between the two customs agencies (Xi Jinping, 2024). Based on the development of relations between the two countries, on March 31, 2020, after the meeting between Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Chinese President Xi Jinping in

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<sup>2</sup> On the Singaporean side, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1990), President Wee Kim Wee (1991); Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000); Prime Minister Go Chok Tong (1993, 1994, 1995, 1997 and 2000); President Ong Teng Cheong (1995), Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (1995, 2000); Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense Tony Tang Keng Yam (1997) visited China in turn.

During his visit to China in early November 2003, Prime Minister Go Chok Tong attended the Boao Forum for the Future of Asia held in Hainan. Afterwards, he met with Chinese President Hu Jintao, National Assembly Chairman Wu Bangguo and held talks with Prime Minister Mr. Jiabao. Based on the results of the above talks, on November 19, 2003, Singapore and China signed a number of Memorandums of Understanding, including: establishing the Singapore-China Bilateral Cooperation Association, the Council of Singapore - Liaoning, Singapore - Zhejiang economy...

As for China, the country's highest leaders have also visited Singapore: President Zhao Ziyang (1993), General Secretary - President Jiang Zemin (1994), Chairman of the Political Conference Ly Thuy Hoan People's Consultation (1995); Prime Minister Ly Bang (1997)....



Beijing, the two countries decided to upgrade their bilateral relationship to "Towards Comprehensive Partnership" (Thao, 2024).

Not only visiting China, the Singapore government also invited Chinese leaders to visit Singapore. On November 18, 2007, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao paid an official visit to Singapore at the invitation of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. During that visit, the two sides signed the "Framework Agreement on Tianjin Eco-City".<sup>3</sup> In 2010, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Singapore-China relations, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Singapore. The most recent visit to Singapore was the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2023.

A notable point in political and diplomatic relations between Singapore and China is that although it attaches great importance to developing relations with China, Singapore has not taken China's side on the South China Sea issue. At the 21st Annual Conference of member countries of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (SPLOS 21) from June 13-17, 2011, taking place at the United Nations headquarters in New York and Singapore with other countries Other Southeast Asians (Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Laos) have called for peaceful solutions and the use of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to resolve disputes in the South China Sea (Thai An, 2024). Next, in a statement issued on May 21, 2011, Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: "We think that it is in China's own interests to clarify its claims in the South China Sea in an official way. more specifically, the current ambiguity is such that it is causing serious concerns in the international maritime community."

After the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) issued a verdict on the Philippines' lawsuit on China's sovereignty claim in the South China Sea (early July 2016), Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong soon expressed his support for this ruling. During his visit to the US in August 2016, he publicly declared that the PCA ruling provided a "strong but decisive definition" for China's unreasonable sovereignty claim. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed his hope that countries will respect international law and accept the results of arbitration. Explaining his stance, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said, "We cannot let international relations operate on the basis of the right of the strong. If this becomes a reality, small countries like Singapore will there is no chance of survival" (Straitimes, 2024). The above statement by the Prime Minister of Singapore caused tensions between Singapore and China. However, the above tensions are only temporary because both Singapore and China desperately need each other's cooperation. Signs of reconciliation between the two sides began to appear at the G.20 Conference held in Hangzhou, China in September 2016. Although not a G.20 member, the Prime Minister of Singapore was invited by President Xi Jinping, as the host country, to attend the G.20 Summit. That move by China shows that Beijing attaches great importance to stability in political relations with Singapore. During a meeting with President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Conference, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said "While Singapore and

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<sup>3</sup> This is the second economic cooperation project between the two governments. The first economic cooperation project is Suzhou Industrial Park built in Jiangsu province in 1994, focusing on high-tech industries.



China may have different views on certain issues, both sides have to manage differences and not allow them to affect the strong bilateral ties.

High-level exchanges between the two countries are still maintained, even during the Covid pandemic. In 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Singapore to discuss bilateral cooperation and regional issues. In 2022, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visits China to further strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries and explore new areas of cooperation. *Actively engage economically*: This is the area where Singapore is most actively engaged with China. Economic cooperation between the two sides has been promoted since the late 1970s, after the historic visit of Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping to this country in early 1979. Since then, the economic relationship between the two sides has increasingly expanded and deepened. To promote cooperation, in November 2003, Singapore and China established the Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC). The Council meets on a regular basis and is headed by two Deputy Prime Ministers of the two countries. This mechanism creates conditions for the two sides to regularly review the current state of bilateral cooperation and suggest measures to improve cooperation and identify new areas of cooperation. JCBC also provides a basis for political and business leaders from both sides to better understand each other through collaboration on joint projects. Below the JCBC are two Joint Steering Councils, also headed by the two Deputy Prime Ministers above. In addition to JSCs, Singapore also established 7 bilateral cooperation councils with 7 provinces of China including Shandong (1993), Sichuan (1996), Liaoning (2003), Zhejiang (2003), Tianjin (2007), Jiangsu (2007) and Guangdong (2009). These councils create conditions for Singapore to explore collaboration with the above localities in China. Thanks to the increasingly effective operation of the above institutions, Singapore - China trade and investment relations have developed strongly, especially since 2001 until now. In 2010, Singapore was China's 8th largest trading partner, and China became Singapore's 3rd largest trading partner with a total trade value of 95.3 billion Singapore dollars, an increase of 26 % from the previous year (S\$75.7 billion).[22] In 2013, China was Singapore's third largest trading partner, while Singapore was China's third largest trading partner among ASEAN countries (China and Singapore, 2024). Regarding investment, Singapore is the earliest ASEAN country to invest in the Chinese economy. In 2010, Singapore's cumulative FDI in China reached 58.1 billion Singapore dollars, up 12% from 51.6% in 2009. In 2014, the country's total FDI in China up to 5.8 billion Singapore dollars with more than 700 projects. In addition to investment from private enterprises, the Singapore government also participates in investment cooperation with China. The latest government-level investment project between the two sides is the project "Explanation of the Initiative on China-Singapore Strategic Connectivity". In addition to the above major projects, Singapore also has a number of other important projects with different provinces of China such as: Guangzhou Smart City; Nanning ecological high-tech island and so on. In recent years, strengthening investment relations has continued to be promoted. In 2024, three Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) were signed between Singapore and China to strengthen business relationships, protect intellectual property rights, and business mediation and arbitration (Singapore and China, 2024). Along with promoting economic cooperation, Singapore also makes efforts



to help China train economic and social management officials. Singapore is the most popular destination for international students and Chinese students. In 2008, there were an estimated 97,000 Chinese students in Singapore, a 13% increase from 86,000 students in 2007. To promote educational cooperation between the two sides, on October 23, 2008, Singapore and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in human resource development. As individuals, a number of Singapore universities also actively cooperate in training human resources for China. In November 2010, the National University of Singapore and Nanyang University of Technology signed separate agreements with local authorities in China to establish research institutes in Tianjin Eco-City and Industrial Park. Suzhou Industrial Park (NUS, 2010).

*Regarding security and defense*, Singapore and China have promoted cooperation in three main activities: Exchange of high-level military delegations; Joint exercises on a number of non-traditional security issues and Strategic Dialogue. Defense cooperation between the two sides is carried out on the basis of the "Agreement on defense exchanges and security cooperation" signed in January 2008 and the 4-point agreement signed during the Singapore Defense Minister's visit to China, Ng Eng Hen November 2012 (Singapore, 2024). Over the years, Singapore and China have continuously exchanged visits by senior military officials from both sides. One of those visits was the visit to China by Lieutenant General Ng Chee Meng, Commander of the Singapore Defense Forces, which took place in mid-April 2015. During that visit, he had a meeting with Mr. Fang Fenghui, Member of the Central Military Commission GUO, and Chief of Staff of the PLA, and met with Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan. To date, Singapore has conducted a number of joint exercises with China. In the third exercise taking place in November 2014 in Nanjing, the two sides practiced live fire with the witness of Singapore's Minister of Defense Ng Eng Hen ( SAF and PLA, 2014). The Defense Policy Dialogue (DPD) between Singapore and China was first held in January 2008 in China. Since then, defense policy dialogue between the two sides has been conducted annually and alternately on the territories of both sides. The contents discussed in the annual DPD are issues of common interest such as: regional security situation and bilateral defense exchanges. To date, 5 DPD conferences have been held<sup>4</sup>. The notable point in Singapore's security and defense engagement with China is that this engagement is only aimed at building trust and cooperation in a few non-traditional security issues. To date, Singapore has never purchased weapons or military equipment from China like Thailand and some other ASEAN countries. In addition to the above areas, Singapore-China cooperation has also been promoted and brought many practical results. In June 2010, Hwa Chong Institute, a famous Singapore graduate school, signed an MOU to have exchanges and mutual learning programs with leading local schools in Smart City in Guangzhou. In November 2010, the National University of Singapore and Nanyang University of Technology signed separate agreements with local authorities in China to establish

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<sup>4</sup> The five strategic consultations were held in Beijing ( 2008 ) , Singapore ( 2009), Beijing ( 2010 ) , Singapore ( 2012 ) . ) v and Beijing ( 2014 ) .





research institutes in Tianjin Eco-City and Industrial Park. Suzhou Institute of Technology (NUS,2010).

*Strengthen comprehensive cooperation with the US, but do not accept being an ally of the US in the region*

*About politics and diplomacy.* Singapore and the US officially established diplomatic relations on April 4, 1966. Singapore not only sees the US as a security support but also as the most important development resource, especially in the years when Singapore first gained independence. According to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, "Strategically, the US presence in the region has been a bulwark of peace and stability for 60 years since the Second World War. As the sole military and economic superpower of the world, the US will continue to play a key leadership role on global issues for many years to come. No major international issue can be resolved without US participation, or at least acquiescence. The US is also the biggest and technologically most advanced economy in the world, and the largest non-Asian foreign investor in the region. Its trade with Asia (US\$685 billion a year) across the Pacific has for more than a decade exceeded its trade with Europe (US\$577 billion a year) across the Atlantic" (The Future Of Asia, 2005). With such a view on the role of the US, Singaporean leaders always call for the US to "return to Southeast Asia". Singapore's perseverance in persuading the US to return to Southeast Asia is not only for the benefit of peace, stability and development of Southeast Asia but also for Singapore's own benefit. Because, once security and stability in Southeast Asia are maintained, Singapore's security will also be guaranteed. However, until President B. Obama came to power (February 2009), the US seemed to ignore those calls. Singapore's Senior Minister Goh Chok-Tong has publicly chided the U.S. for its disengagement from Southeast Asia. He noted in a June 9-2005 speech that in the past decade China has successfully launched 27 separate asean-China mechanisms at different levels, while 28 years after the U.S.-asean dialogue was formalized in 1977, "there are currently only seven U.S.-asean bodies and they meet only infrequently" (Dillon and Tkacik Jr, 2006). Under President Obama's administration, US policy towards Asia, in general, and Southeast Asia in particular, has changed. The "Pivot to Asia" strategy launched by Washington in 2009 is that change. Singapore is one of the first ASEAN countries to welcome the US "Pivot" strategy and create favorable conditions for the US to implement the strategy. In August 2016, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visited the US. During the meeting with US President B. Obama, he expressed hope that Washington plays a positive role in the Asian region. In response, President Obama praised Singapore as the "anchor" for America's presence in Asia confessie only Okay spent give Japan Copy and Australia, two coins bright other belong to America in Asia – Pacific (Minh, 2024).

During his visit to the US in April 2022, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had an important meeting with US President Joe Biden. The two leaders issued a joint statement criticizing Russia for invading Ukraine. However, this does not imply that Singapore chooses the US position. According to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore does not choose sides but stands up to protect the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty (William Choong, 2024). When asked about China-US relations, which are currently very tense because of the trade war launched by previous President Donald



Trump, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed his wish to see more stability in China-US relations. He reminded his audience that the US should treat China as a more developed country and "give it some space to influence the global system." Because, by doing so, Washington can build the foundation for greater China-US cooperation. The above statements by the head of the Singaporean government show that this country attaches great importance to relations with the US, but Singapore is steadfast in not following the US's anti-China policy, although it always calls for the US to increase its support. presence in Southeast Asia, viewing that presence as a tool to restrain China's ambitions for this region.

*Regarding security and defense relations* : This is an outstanding area of cooperation and has a long tradition in Singapore-US relations. On April 21, 2001, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld visited Singapore. In 2003, Singapore agreed to join an informal coalition supporting the US Prohibition Security Initiative (PSI). The goal of this initiative is to pre-empt the transfer of nuclear materials. Also in 2003, Singapore signed a Customs Services Agreement with the US, called the Container Security Initiative, allowing the US to pre-inspect ships carrying goods to the US. However, Singapore rejected an offer by US President George W. Bush in 2003 to assume status as a major non-NATO ally of the United States. Because that position could be seen by China and other major powers as a decision to choose sides by Singapore and would raise the suspicions of Indonesia and Malaysia, its Muslim-majority neighbors. During Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to the US in 2004, Singapore and the US continued to negotiate the Singapore-US Strategic Framework Agreement, which more clearly defined military and security relationships. The agreement was signed by President G. Bush and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in July 2005. Under that agreement, Singapore became "a major security cooperation partner of the United States" (Tay, 2005). According to US Ambassador to Singapore Frank Lavin, this framework agreement is not a formal defense alliance, but will facilitate joint exercises. Those exercises are conducted to counter direct threats to the region and United Nations peacekeeping cooperation operations. The signing of the agreement has facilitated Singapore's access to US defense technology.

*In the military field* , Singapore buys most defense equipment from the US. Singapore is the only country in Asia to participate in the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program led by the US. Since 2000, Changi naval base has allowed the US Navy to dock its transport aircraft (Bolkcom, 2005). Singapore is also one of America's closest partners in terms of defense technology transfer. This is the only Southeast Asian country to receive F.16 and F.15 fighter jets and missile launchers from the US. In addition, the Singapore military also enjoys the privilege of participating in training courses and basic facilities located in the US (MINDEF, 2009).

*In the field of economics* : Singapore-US economic cooperation plays a very important role in Singapore's development, especially in the period after the country first gained independence. Up to now, although the economic relationship between the two countries has not developed as strongly as the Singapore-China economic relationship, Singapore is the US's largest trading partner in Southeast Asia and its 18th largest trading partner internationally. Singapore has succeeded in signing a Free Trade Agreement with the US.



To date, this is the only FTA that the US has signed with a Southeast Asian country. The agreement took effect in 2004. The FTA between the US and Singapore supports about 215,000 jobs for Americans. Bilateral trade in goods and services between the two sides exceeded \$93 billion in 2020. There are currently more than 4,500 US companies registered in Singapore, and the US is the largest foreign investor in Singapore, with about \$270 billion direct investment (About Singapore-US Relations, 2024).

*Regarding other areas :* The US and Singapore have signed a visa exemption agreement, allowing Singaporeans to come to the US for business or tourism purposes with a stay of 90 days or less. Currently, more than 30,000 American citizens live in Singapore and 4,000 Singaporeans study in the United States, more than 1,000 American citizens study in Singapore each year. Not only does it promote bilateral cooperation with the US, Singapore is also an important partner of the US in the Indo-Pacific. One mechanism to help further strengthen cooperation between the two countries is the US-Singapore Third Country Training Program (TCTP). The purpose of TCTP is to provide technical assistance and training to ASEAN member states and Timor-Leste. TCTP focuses on connectivity, sustainable development and regional resilience. Since TCTP was established nearly a decade ago, Singapore and the US have jointly organized 65 courses and trained more than 1,300 government officials from ASEAN member countries, Timor-Leste and the ASEAN Secretariat in the areas of trade, intellectual property, environment, healthcare, urban planning, disaster management and cybersecurity, among others.

### **Actively promote regional integration led by ASEAN**

While attaching importance to promoting relations with both China and the US and trying to balance relations with both powers, the highest priority in Singapore's foreign policy is for ASEAN. According to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, "ASEAN is the cornerstone of our foreign policy. We work actively with our ASEAN partners, we participate in ASEAN projects, we help the less developed countries in ASEAN like Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam or Myanmar particularly, to narrow the development gap through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI)" (PM Lee Hsien Loong, 2024). The reason Singapore values ASEAN is because "Singapore is a sovereign and independent country located in the heart of Southeast Asia. Our destiny lies in Southeast Asia. This is why we attach such great importance to our regional organisation, ASEAN" (Tommy Koh, 2024).

In addition, another reason is because ASEAN is a regional cooperation organization that can facilitate its member countries, including Singapore, balances relations with major countries, especially between China and the US in Southeast Asia. As a regional cooperation organization attracting the participation of 10 countries in the region, a closely integrated ASEAN will help increase resistance against a China that increasingly shows its ambition to monopolize the South China Sea, at the same time, it helps Southeast Asian countries not be too worried about the lack of stability in US policy towards the region in recent years and possibly in the coming years. An ASEAN with deep economic integration creates economic cooperation opportunities that both China and the US cannot ignore. Those benefits will increase the value of ASEAN, in general, and its member countries, in particular. China-US competition will not only be about



competition for political influence and economic benefits, but also about competition influence on the ASEAN organization. This will be an opportunity for ASEAN to implement the policy of balancing influence between major countries that the Association has pursued since the end of the Cold War until now. With such awareness, Singapore has actively participated and made many contributions to the regional integration process of ASEAN. Singapore's contributions were pointed out by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his lecture at S Rajaratnam School on November 27, 2015. Those contributions are: actively cooperating with ASEAN partners, participating in ASEAN projects, helping less developed countries in ASEAN such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, especially Myanmar, help them narrow the gap in development levels through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (Initiative for ASEAN Integration – IAI); promote consensus within ASEAN on common regional issues such as intra-bloc economic integration and resolving cross-border haze pollution. In addition, Singapore also actively works with ASEAN countries in broader forums outside ASEAN, such as the East Asia Summit, ARF, WTO and the United Nations to transform ASEAN into an effective and credible member of larger regional and multilateral forums. These are forums that often converge on the interests of ASEAN countries. That fact has created opportunities for Singapore to promote cooperation with other member countries, contributing to strengthening solidarity and consensus within the bloc (PM Lee Hsien Loong, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

China-US competition in Southeast Asia is the continuous competition between the two major countries since the birth of the Democratic Republic of China, especially since 1954, when France and Britain withdrew their military presence in the East. South Asia. The current US-China competition takes place peacefully in all fields, especially in the fields of politics, security and economics. Like other Southeast Asian countries, Singapore views China-US competition with a positive and cautious attitude. This stance stems from a positive perception of China's economic rise and the important role of the United States in the security and development of Southeast Asia, in general, and Singapore in particular. The more China and the United States compete with each other in Southeast Asia, the more they will have to engage with the region and the more they will need the support of ASEAN and its member countries. However, the competition between these two major countries, if not managed, has the potential to push ASEAN and its member states to a situation where they have to choose sides. This is something Singapore and other countries in Southeast Asia do not want. With such a positive and cautious stance, Singapore has promoted comprehensive cooperation with both China and the US. In relations with China, economic cooperation is more prominent. In relations with the US, security and defense cooperation is promoted the most. This is probably the way to balance relations that Singapore chooses in its policy towards current China-US competition. However, despite valuing relations with both major countries, Singapore still maintains an independent and self-reliant foreign policy. This country publicly spoke out against China in the South China Sea issue. They also refuse to become the non-NATO ally that the US wants the island nation to accept.



To be able to implement a neutral policy towards China-US competition, Singapore also seeks support from ASEAN. It is ASEAN's central role in the emerging regional architecture in East Asia that has kept the Association from being drawn into the US-China competition and supported its member countries to stay out of that competition. Recognizing that, Singapore has actively participated and made many important contributions to ASEAN's regional integration and to multilateral forums founded and led by ASEAN. Singapore's wise response has brought it many important benefits. They not only gain great economic benefits from China and national defense and security benefits from the US, but also enhance their position vis-à-vis both countries. Singapore's experience in dealing with China-US competition has good reference value for small countries in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam

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