

By Invitation

# Singapore's friendship with China

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Both sides can grow in mutual understanding and there is much to learn from each other

Next week, on May 9 and 10, I will be in Beijing, to co-chair the 12th China-Singapore Forum.

My co-chair is Ambassador Wu Hailong, the president of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs.

The forum is being conducted on what is called Track 1.5, meaning that the participants consist of a mixture of government officials and colleagues from the business community, academia and the mass media.

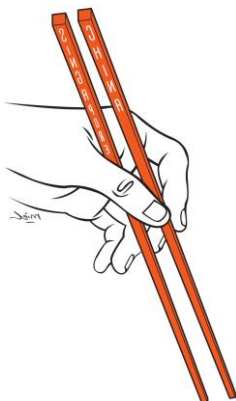
The forum has three objectives.

First, to create a platform for the frank but cordial exchange of views between Singaporeans and Chinese.

Second, to promote better understanding between our two countries.

Third, to grow the community of public intellectuals in the two countries who have a deep interest in the other country and in good relations between them.

In preparation for the 12th forum, I have been thinking about Singapore's friendship with China. I would like to share my thoughts with my fellow Singaporeans as well as with friends in China.



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## **LKY and Deng**

Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made his inaugural visit to China in 1976. The then Chinese ambassador to the United Nations Huang Hua and I had the honour of organising that visit.

Speaking on May 11, 1976, in Beijing, Mr Lee said that Singapore would not be anti-China. He also said that the stronger China became, the better and more equal the balance between the United States, the Soviet Union and China. He concluded that such a balance would be safer for the world and for Singapore. We have never deviated from this vision.

Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping made a historic visit to Singapore in 1978, two years after Mr Lee's visit to China. The visit to Singapore must have reinforced Mr Deng's determination to undertake reform and to open up the Chinese economy to the world.

Mr Deng and Mr Lee developed a strong relationship of mutual respect and mutual trust. Mr Lee decided that Singapore would support China's paradigm shift from a centrally planned economy to a market economy with Chinese characteristics. Mr Deng and his successors had frequently asked Mr Lee for his advice. Mr Lee would visit China almost every year and was sincere in his advice.

## **The Singapore model**

When Mr Deng started China on the journey of reform and opening up to the world, he needed role models. For inspiration, he looked to South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and, especially, Singapore.

In February 1992, Mr Deng's reform agenda was being opposed by conservative elements in the party's leadership. In order to counter them, he took his family on a tour of South China. In Shenzhen, he said that Guangdong province should catch up with the four tiger economies in 20 years. He went on to say: "There is good social order in Singapore. They govern the place with discipline. We should draw from their experience and do even better than them."

Mr Deng's endorsement of Singapore led to a flood of requests from China. In 1992 alone, Singapore hosted the visit of more than 500 delegations from China.

A second contribution which Singapore has made to China is the transfer of knowledge, expertise and experience. Singapore's pioneer finance minister, Dr Goh Keng Swee, served as China's economic adviser. Dr Goh did for China what the Dutch expert, Dr Albert Winsemius, had done for Singapore.

Singapore has been extremely generous in sharing its experience with Chinese leaders and cadres. Both the Nanyang Technological University and the National University of Singapore have customised special Chinese language courses for Chinese officials. The Civil Service College Singapore has also collaborated with China's Central Party School in education and training. In his speech at Nankai University, in 2015, President Tony Tan Keng Yam said that in total, Singapore has provided training to 50,000 Chinese officials and cadres.

This contribution is unique and priceless. Speaking at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on April 17, 2010, China's Vice-President Li Yuanchao said: "Out of all the destinations where we send our leading officials to receive training, Singapore is our top choice because Singapore is the most sincere in helping China develop, due to our longstanding warm relationship."

### **Largest investor**

A third contribution by Singapore is to invest in the Chinese economy. Since 2013, Singapore has become the largest investor in China. Singapore's investment in China is also unique. Let me explain.

Singapore investments fall into three categories.

The first category consists of investments made by Singapore's private sector for purely commercial reasons.

The second category consists of investments made by the private sector in projects which have the backing of the two governments. Two examples are the Sino-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City and the Singapore-Chengdu High-Tech Park.

The third category consists of very large government-to-government projects, such as the Suzhou Industrial Park, the Tianjin Eco-City and the Chongqing Connectivity Project. These iconic projects are not only intended to advance the shared economic interests of the two countries but also to transfer Singapore's software to China. They are also intended to nurture a growing circle of Chinese and Singaporeans who understand each other and are capable of working harmoniously together.

### **Steadfast friend**

A fourth contribution which Singapore has made to China is to be its steadfast friend and to be an interlocutor between China and the US.

Following the tragic Tiananmen incident in 1989, the West condemned China and imposed economic sanctions against it. Singapore did not join the West but continued to invest in China and help China. When negotiations between China and the US on China's accession to the World Trade Organisation reached an impasse, Mr Lee spoke to two members of President Bill Clinton's Cabinet and helped to break the impasse.

Three generations of Singapore's leaders have tried to promote better mutual understanding between China and the US. Singapore was one of the first countries to support the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Singapore is also supporting the One Belt, One Road initiative.

China has made so much progress in the last 30 years that in some areas, Singapore could learn from China.

The use of solar energy is one such area. There are other areas, such as in science and technology, where Singapore can learn from China. The new spirit is mutual learning.

However, there are new areas in which Singapore is still able to make a contribution to China, such as human resource development, social management and financial governance.

In conclusion, I would say that Singapore has been a steadfast, reliable and sincere friend of China since the late 1970s. Looking to the future, China can depend on our goodwill and friendship.

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**The writer is an ambassador-at-large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and co-chairman of the China-Singapore Forum.**