

The special relationship with China

Mr Lee played a vital part in Beijing's transformations and in building bilateral ties

The relationship between China, one of the largest countries in the world, and Singapore, a little red dot in South-east Asia, has been widely regarded as special or unique. Mr Lee Kuan Yew has been instrumental in building this relationship.

Over the past few decades, China has successfully made two simultaneous transformations.

Internally, it has lifted itself from being one of the poorest economies to becoming the world's No 2.

Externally, it has broken out of isolation to become part of the international system.

Why has Singapore under Mr Lee succeeded in building a special relationship with China?

The answer is simple: Mr Lee, and Singapore, have been an important part of China's dual transformations.

He once told journalist Tom Plate, in *Giants Of Asia: Conversations With Lee Kuan Yew*: "The ideas that Deng Xiaoping formed, if he had not come here (in the 1970s) and seen the Western multinationals in Singapore producing wealth for us, training our people so as a result we were able to build a prosperous society, then he might never have opened up ... opening up the coastal SEZs (Special Economic Zones) that eventually led to the whole of China opening up by joining the World Trade Organization ..."

THE PRE-DENG ERA

Since the late Deng, Chinese leaders have appreciated Mr Lee's contribution to China's modernisation, viewing him as its close friend. Even though this relationship began under Deng, the initial effort was laid by Mr Lee in the pre-Deng years.

Up to 1970, China did not recognise Singapore's existence as an independent state and Mr Lee was often derided as a "running dog of United States and British imperialism".

When the US began to normalise ties with China under then President Richard Nixon, Mr Lee saw a chance to improve Singapore's relations with China. He visited China in 1976, meeting Mao Zedong and his successor, Hua Guofeng. Although Mao and Hua did not impress Mr Lee very much, ties between the countries slowly improved.

Mr Lee's first visit to Beijing helped cement Singapore's commercial ties with China. At the same time, Chinese perception of Singapore began to change.

However, real change in the Singapore-China relationship took place only after Deng returned to power in the late 1970s.



LEE AND DENG

Deng was the Chinese leader whom Mr Lee most respected. Although Deng did not make any published comments on Mr Lee, he spoke about Singapore during his landmark Southern Tour to Chinese cities in 1992: "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." His comments soon unleashed a wave of Chinese study visits to Singapore.

Yet, the Republic had influenced Deng earlier on, starting from his reform or "open door" initiatives in December 1978 to allow foreign businesses to set up in China.

He had visited Singapore only a month earlier and showed great interest in its social and economic development experience. Mr Lee believed that what Deng saw in Singapore had shocked him and strengthened his resolve to open up his country to the world. Deng's 1992 comment was a reaffirmation of the Singapore model that he had seen 14 years earlier.

Why did Deng trust Mr Lee and the Singapore model? First, both leaders had a strong mission to build up their respective countries.

Second, both considered their countries' long-term national interest as a priority. Mr Lee's engagement with China during the Cold War was in Singapore's national interest. Similarly, Deng believed that listening to Mr Lee's analysis of the world was in China's national interest.

Third, the men shared a high level of mutual respect and trust, partly due to their similar pursuit of national interest and pragmatism in solving problems they encountered.

In celebration of the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Singapore and China, Mr Lee and then Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping, who was on an official visit to Singapore, unveiled the Deng Xiaoping marker at the Asian Civilisations Museum in November 2010, when Mr Lee was Minister Mentor. The marker is part of the National Heritage Board's efforts to enrich the public's understanding of Singapore's role in regional and world history, as well as honour the achievements of one of China's outstanding leaders.

Zheng Yongnian is professor and director of East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore.

Mr Lee recounted in his book *From Third World To First* what he told Deng during his 1978 visit to Singapore: "ASEAN (Association of South-east Asian Nations) governments regarded radio broadcasts from China appealing directly to their ethnic Chinese as dangerous subversion ... Deng listened silently. He had never seen it in this light ... He knew that I had spoken the truth. Abruptly, he asked: 'What do you want me to do?'"

Not long after, China stopped broadcasting to South-east Asia.

AFTER DENG

In 1992, the Chinese Communist Party held its 14th National Congress and formally incorporated Deng's theory on a socialist market economy into the party's charter. Deng had retired from politics and rarely appeared in public. But the solid foundation laid by him and Mr Lee helped drive the bilateral relationship forward. As China continued its steady growth, economic and business ties between the two countries deepened.

The main reason is that Singapore has constantly made itself relevant to China's development by sharing its experiences and best practices. In 1994, when China initiated a new wave of industrialisation, the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park was established. In 2007, when China's environmental problems became a hot issue before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the idea to jointly build an eco-city was broached and later developed into the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city.

Other key projects include the Sino-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City, Singapore-Chengdu High-Tech Park and the Sino-Singapore Jilin

Food Zone. These projects provide avenues for existing and aspiring leaders from both sides and at different levels to meet each other regularly to strengthen personal ties.

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said: "Mr Lee's good relations with China's leaders enabled Singapore and the leaders who came after Mr Lee to ride on those good relationships."

LEE AS CHINA'S INTERLOCUTOR TO THE WORLD

Singapore's relationship with China is special not only because Mr Lee (and Singapore) have contributed to China's modernisation, but also because he (and Singapore) have helped the world, particularly the West, and China to understand each other.

No leader appears to be as candid as Mr Lee; he often reminded China how to integrate itself into the world. At times, his comments ruffled feathers, particularly among the younger generation of Chinese. But China's leaders understand that Mr Lee's comments were in its interest.

In the same way, Mr Lee helped the West to understand China. Since Deng, the West has frequently dismissed China's growth and its sustainability. Mr Lee would tell the Americans and Europeans that China's growth was indeed real. He often cautioned the US against underestimating China and trying to contain this rising power. Because of his innate understanding of China, Mr Lee's views were sought and closely listened to by other world leaders.

Former US Secretary of State George Shultz once said: "He (Mr Lee) didn't just go see leaders in Beijing. He was able to travel in the country and see people in all sorts of occupations and age levels, so he is a very penetrating observer ... I found that very valuable to listen to what he had to say, as we tried to formulate in the US how we would approach China."

Today, China is an important player on the world stage and its leaders can talk directly to other world leaders everywhere. But Chinese leaders continue to appreciate Singapore's view on the world. As then Vice-President Xi Jinping told Mr Lee during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games: "We will need you for a long time. I have been to Singapore, I know what you have and our people want to learn. We get more from you than from America."

Singapore is constantly finding ways to stay relevant to China. Both countries now cooperate in new areas such as financial cooperation, food safety and social management. For China, it is even more important to get its relationship right with a small, neighbouring country such as Singapore. This will be the best litmus test of its peaceful rise.

ZHENG YONGNIAN