Chapter 10
Singapore’s Response to COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Singapore-China Relations

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10.1 Introduction

Millions of confirmed cases were reported in almost all major countries and territories ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 in the early 2020. The tropical city-state Singapore is among the worst hit countries in the world in terms of the number of confirmed cases per million inhabitants (approximately 8000 as of 10 July 2020) though fatality rate (below 0.1%) was low by international standards. Initially, the development of the coronavirus pandemic in Singapore had a slow start. The government stayed on top of the situation, handling a limited pool of imported and domestically transmitted cases with relative ease. The progression of the pandemic took a sudden turn for the worse in late March and early April 2020 when the highly infectious disease spread intensely among foreign migrant workers, a sizeable occupational group living in close proximity in purpose-built/factory-converted dormitories on the outskirt of Singapore or temporary quarters at construction sites.

Contagion within dorms turned out to be the blind spot of Singapore’s otherwise comprehensive policy responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. Singapore subsequently took a two-pronged strategy that mixed social distancing and massive testing to meet the challenge. On the one hand, Singapore quarantined and tested foreign migrant workers in enormous quantities, separating the infected from the healthy and pre-empting escalating cross infections within dorms. On the other hand, Singapore imposed an island-wide lockdown, known officially as ‘Circuit Breaker’, that lasted over one month between April and June 2020 to cut off community transmission. For all these decisive measures, the pandemic greatly disrupted the Singapore economy which is projected to contract by up to 7% in 2020. In response, Singapore rolled out four stimulus packages to prop up the wobbling economy. Fortunately, in the fight
against the COVID-19, Singapore did not stand alone. Singapore and China cooperated closely on containing COVID-19 by, for instance, maintaining the openness of international trade and regional supply chains especially for the essential goods. Therefore, as the Chinese word for ‘crisis’ (weiji) suggests, the ‘wei’ (danger) of the pandemic has provided the ‘ji’ (opportunity) for Singapore and China to step up public health cooperation and improve bilateral ties at times strained by geopolitical undercurrents.

This chapter offers a preliminary account of the fast-evolving COVID-19 situation in Singapore, which according to analysts is marked by ‘sharp changes measured in weeks, days, and hours’. \(^1\) Section 10.2 documents the on-going development of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore. The emphasis is placed on policy measures put in place to contain the epidemic. Section 10.3 focuses on the economic toll of the COVID-19 on Singapore and Singapore’s fiscal injection to stabilise the economy. Before elaborating on Sino-Singaporean cooperation and mutual assistance in combating the coronavirus (Sect. 10.5), Sect. 10.4 provides a general background of the political and economic relations between the two countries. Section 10.6 concludes the chapter.

10.2 The Development of COVID-19 Outbreak in Singapore

Shortly after China notified the world about a mysterious virus causing pneumonia-like symptoms on December 31, 2019, Singapore started to take precautionary measures to cope with potential imported cases of what was then referred to as ‘severe pneumonia’. On the ground, Singapore drew heavily on the experience of combating the SARS epidemic of 2003–2004 to stay alert. \(^2\)

On January 3, medical teams were deployed at Changi Airport and all inbound passengers arriving on flights from Wuhan were screened for body temperature to detect suspected cases. After a few false alarms, Singapore reported its first confirmed COVID-19 case on January 23, a 66-year-old Chinese national living Wuhan who arrived in Singapore with his family on January 20. \(^3\) In anticipation of a surge in incoming travellers for Chinese New Year holidays, Singapore expanded temperature screening at the airport as well as at all land and sea check points thereafter. Upon the detection of the first COVID-19 case, a Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Wuhan Coronavirus was set up. The Taskforce was co-chaired by health minister Gan Kim Yong and national development minister Lawrence Wong with a mandate to spearhead a whole-of-government response to the coronavirus outbreak. On January 27, three student hostels in the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University were repurposed to Government Quarantine

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\(^1\) Tay and Kevin (2020).
\(^2\) Woo (2020, pp. 345–362).
\(^3\) The second day face masks, both N95 and surgical, ran out at retail outlets.
Facilities (GQFs) to accommodate university students returning from overseas. On the same day, the government began reaching out to all recent travellers from Hubei province, quarantining locals at home and those on short-term visas in designated GQFs across the nation. It was also announced that from January 29, all new visitors with recent Hubei travel history within the last 14 days, or those with Chinese passports issued in Hubei, would not be allowed entry into or transit through Singapore. Following the travel ban, airlines like Singapore Airlines, Scoot and Jetstar all moved to cut back their flights to and from China.

As the total number of coronavirus infections rose slightly in Singapore, the government on February 1 started to hand out four surgical masks (5.2 million masks island-wide) to all Singaporean households with priority given to high-risk groups such as rental block and Pioneer Generation residents. Realising that the coronavirus might have spread to other parts of China, the authorities expanded the travel restrictions on February 1 to ban all passengers with recent travel history to China in the past 14 days from entering or transiting through Singapore. Imported cases were a primary source of concern until the discovery on February 4 of the first local contraction cluster, Yong Thai Hang health products shop. Four women without recent travel history to China caught the virus via this cluster as some of them served Chinese tourists from Wuhan in the shop. Swiftly on February 7, the government raised the nation’s Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) level from Yellow to Orange. The alert level of DORSCON Orange meant that the COVID-19 situation in Singapore was severe but not yet widespread across the country. That said, a wave of panic buying that emptied supermarkets shelves occurred following the DORSCON level revision up. Given the societal perturbation over the coronavirus, the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addressed the nation for the first time on 8 February. He reassured the public that Singapore was well positioned to keep infection under control, thanks partly to the prior experience of combating and the public capacity that established in the aftermath of the 2003 outbreak of SARS. Importantly, he made clear that Singapore’s strategy was to concentrate finite medical resources on the most vulnerable in the society, advising the rest to either go to general practitioner clinics or stay at home for self-isolation.

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4 A S$100 daily allowance was provided to those self-employed under quarantine orders.
5 The policy came after a scramble for masks which led to shortages, hoarding, and profiteering behaviours like price gouging and scalping. The distribution, however, raised eyebrows in some corners as many pointed out that the risk of human-to-human transmission was in fact escalated as people flocked to collect masks at Residents’ Committees and Community Clubs. As of writing, Singapore distributed facemasks for four times.
6 In Singapore, Pioneer Generation (建国一代) refers to Singaporean born on or before 31 December 1949 and obtained citizenship before 31 December 1986. They generally enjoy better policy treatment to honour their contributions in the early days of Singaporean nation-building. Singapore became a fully independent republic in August 1965.
7 Singapore used to raise DORSCON level to Orange in 2009 when containing the H1N1 Influenza.
8 For instance, a 330-bed National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) was built after the SARS outbreak to strengthen Singapore’s infectious disease management and prevention capacity. The NCID played a hugely important role in Singapore’s fight against the COVID-19. In the early phases, nearly all confirmed and suspected coronavirus patients were warded in the NCID.
From mid-February, the Singaporean Ministry of Manpower began advising employers to allow for work-from-home arrangements. Singapore’s Land Transport Authority for its part distributed four masks to every taxi and private hire car driver on February 10. Grab, Southeast Asia’s biggest ride-hailing platform, suspended its taxi and car sharing services from February 9 to reduce the risk of in-car transmission. Taxi companies also implemented a waiver of cab rental fees should any drivers were to be placed under quarantine. Regarding the usage of facemasks, in keeping with the prevailing advice of the WHO at the time, the official stance of Singapore maintained that masks should only be worn by the sick in their visits to clinics. On February 14, the Ministry of Health (MOH) activated the Public Health Preparedness Clinics scheme, consolidating the country’s primary care clinic resources to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak. Doctors were encouraged to give five days of medical leave for patients with respiratory symptoms. From February 17, the ‘Stay-Home Notice’ (SHN) took effect, disallowing travellers returning from China from leaving home within 14 days of arrival.\footnote{Following the uncovering of the South Korean infection clusters involving the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu and a hospital in Cheongdo, Singapore expanded travel restrictions to the two Korean places from 26 February and returnees from there would have to serve the two-weeks quarantine order.}

The government’s meeting with local religious leaders was also held, trying to keep religious events and folk activities alike away from the coronavirus.

Nevertheless, places of worship proved to be highly prone to coronavirus transmission due to the regularity and intimacy of sustained human interactions. Of the four infection clusters that emerged in February, two were religion-related (i.e. Grace Assembly of God and The Life Church and Missions Singapore). Notably, these two COVID-19 clusters were detected using a novel serological technique to identify the asymptomatic and those who had recovered from earlier infection. It was also first time that antibody tests were used to track coronavirus infection.\footnote{Normile (2020).} On February 28, it was announced that all political office holders, including President Halimah Yacob, would be taking a one-month pay cut while members of parliament would take a one-month pay cut in allowance.\footnote{On 27 March, it was announced that ministers would undertake a three-month instead of the announced one-month pay cut.} The pay cut by officials and parliamentarians was accompanied by a special bonus of up to one-month salary to front line health workers in recognition of their hard work and sacrifice in protecting the health of the country.

In early March, Singapore banned all visitors arriving from South Korea, Iran and northern Italy and required all inbound travellers with fever or showing respiratory illness to undergo swab tests. But on March 10, Singapore allowed some 600 passengers, all found to be well, to disembark from the Italian cruise ship Costa Fortuna after being denied by three Thai and Malaysian ports. On the same day, a large and growing cluster linked to a private dinner function at SAFRA Jurong on February 15 became known to the public and the MOH suspended all government-sponsored...
activities for senior citizens for two weeks. The People’s Association, the organisation charged with overseeing grassroots activities, also decided to suspend some group activities such as Qigong, line-dancing and singing for the elderly. On March 12, Prime Minister Lee delivered his second televised address to the nation. The following day, Singapore announced a ban on visitors from Italy, France, Spain and Germany and another ban on new ticketed sports, cultural and entertainment events with crowds of 250 people or more. On March 15, the applicability of the travel ban expanded drastically to incorporate the ASEAN countries (with the exception of Malaysia), Japan, Switzerland and Britain. Three days later, all travellers entering Singapore would be issued a 14-day SHN from 20 March. The government even booked over 7500 hotel rooms for SHN purposes. The Government Technology Agency also developed a smartphone app, ‘TraceTogether’, for voluntary adoption to facilitate contact tracing efforts.

The first two cases of death from the coronavirus were reported on March 21, involving a 75-year-old Singaporean woman and a 64-year-old Indonesian man, both with a history of heart disease. Upon the two demises, the first ever comprehensive travel ban was implemented by Singapore on March 23, from when all short-term visitors except those involved in essential industries like healthcare and transport were banned arriving or transiting through the country. Again, due to the social and geographical closeness Singapore and Malaysia, Malaysians with valid work permits and Malaysia-based Singaporeans were exempted from such travel restrictions. Crucially, the travel ban was imposed when Malaysia was taking similarly strict border-control and lockdown measures, sparking fears of food shortages and actual runs on supermarkets in Singapore. Public sentiment did not calm down until the government clarified that Singapore-Malaysia trade would continue. Nevertheless, NTUC Fairprice, the largest Singaporean supermarket chain, had to come up with a list of goods including canned food, eggs, poultry, paper products, cooking oil and frozen meat that would be subject to purchase limit per customer. From March 29, all long-term pass (e.g., student pass and employment pass) holders had to obtain pre-approval from the immigration authority before they could come to Singapore. All primary, secondary and centralised institutes under the Ministry of Education were required to implement Home-Based e-Learning for one day every week. All entertainment outlets were closed and mass gatherings of any sizes cancelled.

Thanks to these and other decisive containment efforts, for nearly three months since January, Singapore handled the outbreak with relative ease. The government managed to trace and isolate each person infected with the coronavirus and was held up globally as the ‘near-perfect’ model to emulate. The situation, however, took sharp turn in late March as explosive infections of the coronavirus erupted within the foreign migrant workers living in cramped and often unhygienic dormitories. The issue surfaced on April 5 when the authorities noticed that of the 120 confirmed

12Rene Niehus, Pablo M De Salazar, Aimee Taylor, Marc Lipsitch, Quantifying Bias of COVID-19 Prevalence and Severity Estimates in Wuhan, China that Depend on Reported Cases in International Travelers, MedRxiv, https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.02.13.20022707.
13As of December 2019, around 293 thousand foreigners were employed in the construction industry of Singapore. The majority of the migrant labour came from neighbouring Asian countries such
cases 32 were migrant workers. Knowing that there might have been surges in cases among migrant workers who live, work and interact in socially crowded settings, the government gazetted two dormitories worst hit by the coronavirus, the S11 Dormitory@Punggol and Westlite Toh Guan, with immediate effectiveness. Over twenty thousand of foreign workers were quarantined for two weeks as a result. This move marked the watershed moment in the fight against the coronavirus. From this moment onwards, Singapore shifted policy attention towards dormitory cases.

An Inter-Agency Taskforce to Support Foreign Workers and Dormitory Operators comprising manpower, health, environment, army and police personnel was established within days to lead the governmental efforts to contain dormitory contagion. On April 20, spikes in dormitory cases made Singapore the country with the most COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia.14 By late April, the work of all foreign workers and their spouses was ceased (and 25 of the 43 dormitories were gazetted as isolation areas at this writing). Massive testing was followed focusing on those with apparent symptoms, a history of close contact with confirmed cases and work in essential industries. Depending on the results of tests, foreign workers were segregated into three groups: the healthy were transferred to temporary accommodations in vacant public institutes (e.g., Northshore Primary School and Home Team Academy), newly constructed dorms (e.g., Changi East), refurbished Housing Board blocks (e.g., Redhill Close and Bukit Merah), unused car parks, indoor sports halls (at Pasir Ris, Jurong West, Clementi and Hougang), resorts (e.g., Cherryloft), floating lodgings converted from floating construction support vessels (e.g., Bibby Progress and Bibby Renaissance) as well as army camps (e.g., Jurong Camp II and Bedok Camp II) provided by the government.15 The workers who were being tested were quarantined in a special swab isolation facility until their test results were available; and those tested positive for the COVID-19 were either hospitalised or sent to GQFs and community care facilities (e.g., Singapore Expo and Changi Exhibition Centre). Notably, besides a team of over 800 doctors drawing from the Army Medical Services and major hospitals who attended to the foreign workers in person, telepresence robots and mobile teleconsultation stations were deployed so as to reduce doctors’ face-to-face communication with the infected. Websites that translate English to Tamil and Bengali were also developed for the medical teams to communicate readily with foreign workers.16

At the same time, Singapore imposed a sweeping nation-wide lockdown to minimise community exposure to the pandemic. Initial measures announced by Prime

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141426 cases were reported on 20 April. This was the highest single-day jump in confirmed COVID-19 cases in Singapore. Of the reported, 1371 were foreign worker cases.

15As of early June, more than 2,000 healthy migrant workers moved into temporary accommodations.

16David Koh, Migrant Workers and COVID-19, *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, Vol. 77, pp. 634–636. https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2020-106626.
Minister Lee during his address to the nation on April 3 kicked in on April 7 from when all non-essential workplaces were shut down. Wearing a mask became compulsory. All schools changed to home-based online learning from April 8. Enhanced SHN was implemented according to which all travellers entering Singapore would serve 14-day self-isolation at dedicated facilities. As the number of unexpected and unlinked infection cases worsened in the days after the declaration of the national lockdown, Singapore tightened and extended the Circuit Breaker regime on April 21. Only one person per family was allowed to go out for a limited period of time and access to popular markets was restricted based on the last digit of national identity card number. Approximately 3000 safe Distancing Ambassadors and Enforcement Officers were dispatched daily in places like wet markets and supermarkets to thin out crowds.\(^{17}\) The public were also encouraged to report those who flouted safe distancing rules through the government app ‘One Service’. Wearable tracking ‘tokens’ were distributed to vulnerable senior citizens who could not use the mobile phone app ‘TraceTogether’. A ‘SpaceOut’ website was developed by Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority. It tracks real-time crowd levels in malls and supermarkets across Singapore, in order to assist the public in making informed choices on where and when to make purchases.\(^{18}\) To prepare for eventually lifting the lockdown, the government ramped up pro-active surveillance and screening for high-risk groups such as pre-school staff and nursing home residents. A few community cases were picked up.

The national lockdown was eased firstly on May 5 when Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) shops, home-based food businesses and hairdressers and barber shops were allowed to provide basic services to consumers. In terms of sequencing, the Circuit Breaker regime was phased out in three steps from June 1. In Phase 1 (‘Safe Reopening’), basic business, in-person marriage solemnisations events, family visits, religious sites and pre-schools opened. In Phase 2 (‘Safe Transition’), more companies resumed activities and in Phase 3 (‘Safe Nation’), smaller-scale social, cultural, religious and business gatherings would be permitted. Phases 1 and 2 started on 2 June and 19 June, respectively. Phase 3 will last until an effective treatment or vaccine is developed. Singapore additionally re-opened its borders in a managed manner for Singaporeans to conduct essential activities overseas and to allow safe travel for foreigners entering or transiting through Singapore.\(^ {19}\) During this three-phased lifting process, practising social distancing is a legally binding requirement. In the post-Circuit Breaker period, family, community and workplace cases increased but dorm infections remained the key concern for Singapore though the number of daily reported cases was on a clear downward trend. As of July 10, Singapore reported 609 imported cases, 2027 community cases (infection rate: 0.04\%) and 42,977 dorm cases (infection rate: 13.31\%). Of the total 45,613 patients, 39,925 completed isolation and 1855 were discharged from hospital. Only 26 died from the disease in Singapore.

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\(^{17}\) Justin (2020).

\(^{18}\) Tanya (2020).

\(^{19}\) All inbound travellers had to take a swab test and pay for it.
10.3 Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Singapore

The economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic is huge for Singapore given its reliance on international trade and global economy. In general, a global crisis like the COVID-19 represents a supply and demand shock as movement restrictions disrupt supply chains and curtail consumer and industrial spending. Singapore’s aviation, tourism, and arts, entertainment & recreation industries have been the most adversely affected and other consumer-facing sectors (e.g., food services, retail trade, and land transport) have been significantly affected; moderately affected industries in Singapore are largely outward-oriented ones such as manufacturing, wholesale trade, information & communications, and financial and professional services as external demand plummet against the backdrop of broken global supply chains. The COVID-19 also amounts to a severe financial shock. With regional and international investors taking on a ‘sell-everything’ mode amid a deepening pandemic, Singapore’s benchmark Straits Times Index (STI) was sent into tailspin in February. The STI touched 2233.48 on March 23, the lowest since July 2009. Likewise, Singaporean resident unemployment rate hit 10-year low as of March 2020, at 3.3%. The Moody’s, a global credit rating agency, in April downgraded the outlook of Singapore’s banking sector from ‘stable’ to ‘negative’ and the investment worthiness of several Singaporean multinationals including government-linked ones. Singapore’s own Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) also moved to revise down the country’s forecast GDP growth three times in a row between February and May in recognition of the fact that the underlying domestic and global economic conditions continued to deteriorate. As of writing, the MTI was of the opinion that Singapore economy would contract by between 4% and 7% in 2020.

To cope with the economic shrinkage and to protect livelihoods, Singapore introduced four expansionary stimulus packages, known officially as ‘budgets’, in the course of the continual combat against the coronavirus. The first budget that Singapore came up with, Unity Budget, was announced in February as the first line of defence to cushion the immediate negative economic outcome arising from the pandemic. The aim was to support frontline health workers and stabilise Singapore economy in the near term. A month later when it was clear that the pandemic was much broader in scope, Singapore introduced a second budget, Resilience Budget, in March, which included more comprehensive and direct relief measures for businesses and households. The third budget, Recovery Budget, was announced in June as the country continued to recover from the pandemic. Finally, the fourth budget, Stabilisation Budget, was introduced in October to ensure Singapore economy remained resilient in the face of uncertainties.

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20 According to Singapore Department of Statistics, 529 eateries were closed between February and April 2020.

21 Singapore’s retail sales dropped by 52.1 per cent year on year in May 2020 during the circuit breaker period. This was the biggest year-on-year fall since record-keeping started in 1986.

22 Singapore’s factory mode as captured by the Purchasing Managers’ Index had been the contraction territory for five consecutive months (February to June), pointing to a reduction in size for the manufacturing economy.

23 Christopher Saw, Jonathan Lin, Wong Yu Jie, “Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Singapore Economy”, Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Resources/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore/2020/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore-First-Quarter-2020/FA_1Q20.pdf.

24 Singaporean citizen unemployment rate was 3.5 per cent whereas overall unemployment rate stood at 2.4% as of March 2020.
would drag on for the foreseeable future, Singapore announced a S$48.4 billion Resilience Budget with the view to strengthening economic and social resilience so that speedy recovery is possible when the economy comes out on the other side of the global disaster. The Resilience Budget was more broad-based compared to the Unity Budget, focusing on such COVID-19 relief measures as welfare pay-outs and cash flow support to businesses. Knowing that the Circuit Breaker regime would weigh heavily on economic dynamism and societal morale, Singapore government put forth a Solidary Budget in April to keep the economy going when the entire country was placed under lockdown. It strived to help companies preserve production capacity while tiding families through the difficult period of staying at home. A fourth Fortitude Budget was announced in May. Unlike the previous ones, the Fortitude Budget looked beyond the COVID-19 pandemic with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat vowing to avoid the formation of a ‘COVID generation’ of Singaporean workers and students whose life and career prospects are permanently damaged by the pandemic. Through the budget, the government hence incentivised business to adapt to a post-COVID-19 global commercial environment and workers to upskill for the future workplace. Notably, of the S$93.2 billion (or around 20% of GDP) Singapore was spending on its four budgets, S$52 billion came from past reserves. The four budgets would push Singapore’s overall budget deficit for Fiscal 2020 to some $74.3 billion (15.4% of GDP)-the highest level since the founding of the Republic of Singapore in 1965. The effectiveness of the budgets will be assessed in future research. In the next section, we turn to the broad background of Sino-Singaporean relations before taking stock of the two countries’ specific cooperative activities on battling the COVID-19 pandemic.

10.4 China-Singapore Political and Economic Relations

China and Singapore formally established diplomatic relations on October 3, 1990, but political exchanges between the two countries dating back to the 1970s predated the official recognition of each other. Singapore’s first Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam visited China for the first time in 1975, paving the road for the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to visit China a year later. In November 1978, then Chinese de facto leader Deng Xiaoping embarked on a historic visit to Singapore, after which he spoke highly of Singapore as a good model to emulate for China’s domestic reform and opening up. In 1985, then Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee was appointed by China as an Advisor to the Chinese government. Even present day, Dr Goh is widely seen as a leading architect of China’s coastal, industrial and urban development. High-level visits and candid face-to-face consultations continued to be frequently arranged in the 1990s

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25 Chew (2020).
26 Saw Swee Hock, Evolution of Singapore-China Economic Relations in Hock and Wong (2014).
27 Lee Kuan Yew eventually visited China 33 times in his life.
as Lee Kuan Yew became close to former Chinese President Jiang Zemin. Into the 21st century, Xi Jinping visited Singapore before he resumed the post of Chinese President to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2010.

Despite the high-profile (paramount-)leader-diplomacy, for a sustained period of time, China-Singapore relations were marred with difficulties in part due to Singapore’s intrinsic sense of insecurity (and the self-preservation-oriented besiege/’porcupine’ mentality) and China’s insufficient understanding of the world. A set of fundamental misunderstandings towards each other had also come to bear on the occasionally strained relations. On the other hand, China, in view of the fact that Singapore is a Chinese-majority society, expected the Singaporean leadership to invariably sympathise with China in foreign affairs or be supportive of Beijing’s stance on the world stage, notwithstanding the reality that Singapore is a sovereign nation. On the other hand, Singapore positioned itself internationally as if the only viable manifestation of national sovereignty was to prove that Singapore was not the ‘third China’ and could make foreign policy courses not necessarily agreeable to Beijing. Chang indeed notes that Singapore prides itself over a ‘quiet, friendly and firm style of diplomacy’ vis-à-vis China and sees itself as a development mentor that could always work out economic problems for Beijing. The resultant two-way mis-judgements, mutual disappointments, cross-purpose engagement and sometimes deliberately brinkmanship behaviours had frustrated the bilateral ties, official or unofficial. Singapore chose to be the last nation in Southeast Asia to normalise its diplomatic relations with China to reassure its Muslim-majority neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, that Singapore was not keen on being close to China. Singapore also maintained ‘private’ political and military-to-military relations with Taiwan. In protest, for example, China seized the shipment of nine Terrex infantry carriers that Singapore had shipped through Hong Kong on their return from a training exercise in Taiwan in November 2016, sending a clear if forceful message that Singapore’s long-standing defence ties with Taiwan, currently governed by the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, are no longer tolerable.

However, what annoys China most is Singapore’s pro-Washington foreign and security policy. Since its independence in 1965, successive generations of Singaporean leaders have subscribed to the conviction that an endurable and robust presence of the US is the single most important and effective guarantor of regional peace and national security. The belief emanates from Singapore’s ‘besiege’ geopolitical mentality and security outlook as a small ‘red dot’. The preponderance of American power, the logic goes, will prevent Southeast Asia being dominated by China, or for that matter, any other regional powers, be it Japan, India or Indonesia, and alleviate regional geopolitical uncertainty. As such, Singapore spared no effort in institutionalising America’s presence in the region. In 1990, Singapore signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), allowing the US military to use Singaporean facilities. On the basis of the 1990 MOU and its 1998 Addendum, Singapore built the Changi Naval Base which can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers even if Singapore has no aircraft.
carriers of its own. In 2005, Singapore’s relations with the US was transformed with the inking of the Strategic Framework Agreement for a Closer Cooperation Partnership in Defense and Security, making the city-state, as one analyst rightly puts, ‘an unequivocal [treaty] ally of the [US] in everything else but name’. The US has since elevated its naval presence in and around Singapore as permitted by these access agreements. The extensive defence and security cooperation between Singapore and the US unsettle Beijing as China heavily relies on the Strait of Malacca for international trade and the importation of critical commodities such as oil and gas. Economically, Singapore resorted to the originally 12-party Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to secure US trade leadership in the Pacific Asia though the incumbent U.S. President Trump withdrew from the TPP on his first working day in office on domestic political accounts. Singapore’s enthusiastic participation in the US-led TPP campaign that excluded China and publicly stated support for the ‘Rebalance to Asia’ strategy of the Obama administration was among the reasons why China reportedly refuse to invite Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to attend the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017. While Singapore is not a claimant country in regional maritime disputes, Prime Minister Lee’s reference to the ruling by an arbitration tribunal in The Hague rejoinder China’s territorial claims in the SCS as a ‘strong statement’ led to rampant speculation and interpretation that Singapore agreed with the ruling, further driving a wedge between China and Singapore as far as geopolitics was concerned.

With the rise of isolationist and protectionist sentiment in the US of which Trump’s political slogan of ‘America First’ is a symptom, Singapore has been pragmatically finetuning its China policy and refrained from further antagonising Beijing on issues of core Chinese interest. As a result, China–Singapore relations have gravitated towards a friendlier state of affairs. In 2019, China and Singapore signed an enhanced Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation to strengthen security trust.

In stark contrast to the largely chequered political and diplomatic relations, in line with Singapore’s and China’s respective self-images of a global liberal trading state and the fastest growing developing economy, the two countries are key and intimate trading partners for each other. For Singapore, China is the largest trading partner in goods, accounting for around 13% of its merchandise exchange with the world. For China, Singapore is its 14th largest trading partner, ranking ahead of countries like the UK in terms of trade volume. Singapore is also China’s fourth largest trading partner in ASEAN (after Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand), representing approximately 15% of China–ASEAN trade, notwithstanding two deep plunges in 2009 (during the Global Financial Crisis) and 2016 (amidst global growth softening), reaching over $100 billion in 2018. Trade flows have been prodigiously dominated

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29 See Seng Tan, Riding the Chinese Dragon: Singapore’s Pragmatic Relationship with China. In Tsunekawa (2009).
30 Lynn (2016).
31 Ji and Rana (2019, pp. 230–255).
by electrical and industrial machineries, oil and mineral fuels, precision instruments as well as chemical products.

Since the entering into force of the China–Singapore Free Trade Agreement (CSFTA) in 2009, Singapore’s modest trade deficits have been turned into persistent trade surplus vis-à-vis China. Notably, the CSFTA marks Singapore as the first Asian economy to sign a comprehensive bilateral FTA with China.\(^{32}\) Thanks to the CSFTA, as of 2018, over 91% of Chinese exports crossed Singaporean borders without paying customs duties. Conversely, close to 84% of Singaporean goods entered into China on a tariff-free basis. The two countries further upgraded the preferential trade pact in October 2019, expanding the scope of free trade in goods while striving to reduce non-tariff barriers to trade in services and mutual investment. For example, a more robust Investor-State Dispute Settlement and simplified customs procedures have been agreed to in the new CSFTA. China has additionally pledged to liberalise its petrochemical, legal, maritime and construction service sectors for Singaporean companies in exchange for greater access to the city-state’s skilled labour market and banking industry. Furthermore, three completely new chapters on competition, environment and e-commerce were attached to the original version of the trade agreement, reflecting different requirements for regulating and facilitating 21st-century international trade. China and Singapore are also the leading members of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a mega-FTA in the making that involves ten ASEAN countries and its Foreign Partners including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.\(^{33}\) India has opted out at this writing due to domestic and international economic concerns.

China-Singapore investment ties are equally strong. Singapore is the fourth largest recipient of Chinese outbound FDI, trailing behind Hong Kong, China, the US and Virgin Islands. Since 2010, Chinese direct investment has been rising by around 10% each year on average. In 2018, Chinese FDI in Singapore amounted to US$ 6.4 billion. This constituted nearly two-thirds of total Chinese investment in Southeast Asia. By the end of 2018, the total Chinese FDI stock in Singapore had reached the level of US$ 50 billion. In terms of sectoral distribution, Singapore’s wholesale and retail trade services, financial and insurance services, energy, real estate and professional services have attracted the brunt of Chinese capital inflow. A recent example is Alibaba’s acquisition of Lazada, a Singapore-based e-commerce company operating in six ASEAN countries. Of late, organic growth is also taking place in the digital, information and telecommunication sector. Conversely, Singapore is China’s second largest source of FDI (with US$ 5.2 billion in actually utilised investment in 2018, up from US$ 4.8 billion a year earlier), and China is Singapore’s largest investment destination worldwide. Total Singaporean investment stock in China as of 2018 amounted to US$ 99.1 billion, ahead of Indonesia (US$ 45.7 billion) and India (US$ 42.9 billion). Singaporean investment presence has been, as expected,

\(^{32}\)Chen Wen and Zhai Baiquan, Singapore-China Trade and CSFTA in Hock and Wong (2014).

\(^{33}\)Ji, Competitive Mega-regionalism: The Trilateral Power Play by the United States of America, China and the European Union, PhD Thesis, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
concentrated so far in the Chinese financial and insurance, real estate and maritime sector.

Institutionally, the flourishing Sino-Singaporean economic partnership, which is growing from strength to strength, is underpinned by the deputy-prime ministerial level Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC), launched in November 2003 by the then Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and the then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. It is remarkable that the JCBC can be formed given the massive economic size asymmetry between the two countries. The JCBC represents an annual opportunity for the two countries to review together the state of bilateral commercial relations while charting out new courses of win-win cooperation. It is simultaneously a yearly recurring mechanism for government officials of various hierarchical levels and business leaders from a diversity of backgrounds to network and interact. Indeed as one analyst notes, networks and relationships forged through the JCBC between the policy and business circles of China and Singapore are an ‘essential element’ for the two countries to cultivate ‘strong and lasting relations’. Over the years, the breadth and depth of cooperation coordinated by the JCBC has expanded from an initial focus on trade and investment to cover a host of inter-related domains like educational and academic exchange, taxation, banking regulation, currency swap, food and agriculture, capital market, and infrastructure development. Falling under the purview of the JCBC as illustrated are three prominent government-to-government projects, namely, China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City (SSTEC) and China-Singapore (Chongqing) Demonstration Initiative on Strategic Connectivity (CCI). Through the SIP, Singapore has played a catalytic role in the industrialisation process of China since 1994. The SIP model is now being exported and replicated by Chinese developers in other countries like Laos, India and Israel. The idea of building the SSTEC was floated by Singapore as a means to share the city-state’s urban design and development experiences with China where rapid urbanisation had posed severe social and environmental sustainability challenges. The SSTEC broke ground in 2008. The CCI, unveiled in 2015, was pursued in part to operationalise China-Singapore BRI cooperation. In particular, it seeks to anchor Chongqing’s status as an international hub for multi-modal logistics in inland China as well as Singapore’s position as a privileged international economic partner. The synchronisation of the New International Land Sea Trade Corridor, a key component of the CCI, with the parallel running Singapore-Nanning and Singapore-Kunming economic corridors also diversifies Singapore’s connectivity engagement with different parts of South China.

Beginning with the SIP and moving on to the SSTEC and finally the CCI, one sees the following ‘progression’ in the shifting cooperative pattern, from Singapore outsourcing its industry to China via the SIP as the developmental mentor, to Singapore teaming up with China in the SSTEC as an equal partner, and finally to Singapore riding on the opportunities under the CCI that China’s ambitious BRI scheme offers as a major beneficiary. Besides these three large-scale flagship projects, another group of predominately private-sector-driven projects like Wuxi-Singapore

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34 Saw Swee Hock, Evolution of Singapore-China Economic Relations in Hock and Wong (2014).
Industrial Park, Sichuan-Singapore High-tech Innovation Park, Shenyang Singapore Industrial Park, Guangzhou Knowledge City, Nanjing Singapore Eco High-Tech Island, Ningbo Zhongxin Innov Park, and Sino-Singapore Jilin Food Zone are living testament to the robust bilateral economic partnership between China and Singapore. Prime Minister Lee has in fact praised the private-led project model as a cogent and viable cooperative approach that balances policy and commercial imperatives.\textsuperscript{35}

Under the ambit of the JCBC, there are also eight second-tier councils between Singapore and Chinese regions of Shandong, Sichuan, Liaoning, Zhejiang, Tianjin, Jiangsu, Guangdong and Shanghai. These bodies considerably regularise and buttress Singapore’s connections with provincial authorities and are tasked with dealing with practical problems that arise on the ground when pushing forward joint projects. The existence of these platforms goes a long way in indicating that Singapore is determined to stay relevant to not only national but also local development and modernisation in China.

10.5 China–Singapore Mutual Assistance Amid COVID-19 Pandemic

In the 2003 SARS outbreak, China and Singapore had combatted the infection within their borders with little coordination and mutual assistance. But this time neither China nor Singapore has been fighting against the coronavirus alone—the horrifying global pandemic has in fact provided an additional avenue on top of geopolitics and economics for the two countries to strengthen public health cooperation and assist each other, physically, financially and morally, in ways rarely witnessed before.

When China’s COVID-19 situation was at its peak in early 2020, the outpouring of Singaporean support was tremendous and unprecedented in some aspects. On February 4, Singapore’s foreign ministry announced that the country would provide a seed funding of S$ 1 million—the highest amount of official foreign emergency aid in recent years—to the worst struck part in China. Singapore also donated medicine, medical supplies, 20,000 COVID-19 diagnostic test kits and three Polymerase Chain Reaction equipment for use in Chinese laboratories. The seed funding from the government by mid-February had helped Singapore Red Cross raise a total of S$ 6 million in public donations from individuals, Signature Consulting, Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation, Business China and others. Over a third of the fund were spent on purchasing and distributing N95 and surgical masks, goggles, face shields, surgical caps, ventilators, respiratory humidifiers, chlorine tablets, and electrocardiography detectors to hospitals and healthcare providers in six cities in Hubei province and seven social welfare homes in Tianjin and Nanning. The remaining funds were used to support other coronavirus-fighting activities such as risk communication (e.g., dissemination of personal hygiene and disease prevention information through infographics, short videos, child-friendly booklets and WeChat posts),

\textsuperscript{35}Zheng and Lye (2015).
community engagement, water, sanitation and hygiene outreach programmes. The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry mobilised an additional S$1.1 million among its members. Singapore state-linked and private corporations like the Government of Singapore Investment Corp, Keppel Corporation, Yihai Kerry, Winning Group and Wilmar International also contributed separately, donating about 68 million yuan in cash and tens of millions of yuan worth of medical supplies for COVID-19 relief operations in China. The first tranche of the Singaporean humanitarian assistance reached Wuhan on February 8 via a chartered flight. It was estimated the more than 100,000 Chinese citizens benefited from it in the short term. On February 22, Singapore’s defence ministry delivered over 20,000 kilograms of medical supplies including fast test kits and surgical gloves to the PLA for distribution in Chinese military and field hospitals. Dr Ng Eng Hen, the Singaporean defence minister, said that Singapore ought to lend a helping hand to repay the Chinese goodwill of overcoming difficulties in dispatching the Ba Yi Aerobatics Team to perform in the Singapore Air Show, a Singapore-hosted event nearly cancelled because of the coronavirus outbreak. Singaporean President Yacob and Prime Minister Lee wrote letters to Chinese President Xi Jinping on February 24, expressing deep solidarity with China and thanking the Chinese government for facilitating the repatriation of Singaporean nationals and their dependents from Hubei. On April 1, the Chinese deputy foreign minister Luo Zhaohui and Permanent Secretary Chee Wee Kiong of Singapore’s foreign ministry co-chaired the virtual China-Singapore Joint Meeting on COVID-19. The two sides especially emphasised the importance of maintaining smooth and open air and sea freight lines. A week later, the two militaries held a similar video conference on April 8 to exchange views on the COVID-19 pandemic and shared the latest diagnostic and treatment good practices. The 2nd China-Singapore Joint Meeting on COVID-19 was held on May 28. The two countries pledged to safeguard connectivity of production and supply chains during difficult times. In the meantime, China donated 600,000 masks to Singapore on May 5.

From the late March when the virus swept across several foreign worker dormitories, Chinese and Chinese-funded Singaporean companies began taking active actions to fulfil their social corporate responsibilities. They played a constructive role in the overall disease prevention and control efforts in Singapore. They first of all moved to help foreign labours, many of whom were at the grave risk of being laid off or contracting the virus. On the initiative of Chinese Enterprises Association (Singapore), Bank of China, Shanghai Tunnel, Beyond Soft and other business organisations

36Cindy (2020).
37Ai Xin Juan Zeng Nuan Ren Xin! Xin Jia Po Ge Jie Zhu Li Zhong Guo Kang Ji Xin Guan Fei Yan Yi Qin [Caring Donation Warms the Heart! Singapore Helps China Fight COVID-19 Outbreak] (2020).
38Cindy (2020).
39Zai Xin Zhong Zi Qi Ye Ji Ji Lv Xing She Hui Ze Ren Zhi Yuan Zhong Guo Gong Min Ji Xin Jia Po Ben Di Yi Qin Fang Kong [Chinese Enterprises in Singapore Actively Fulfill Their Social Responsibilities to Support Chinese Citizens and Local Epidemic Prevention and Control in Singapore] (2020).
collectively donated nearly S$ 20,000 to the Singapore Foreign Worker Settling-in Programme. Shenyang SiaSun (Singapore) donated S$ 80,000 to the Singapore Red Cross. Concurrently, Agricultural Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, China Construction Bank, China Merchants Shipping, Wanhe International, and other enterprises donated a large amount of much-needed anti-epidemic materials such as face masks, disinfectants and hand sanitisers to local business groups, residential communities and schools. YOOZOO, a Chinese gaming company, donated S$600,000 worth of laptops to five Singaporean polytechnics to facilitate students’ online learning during the lockdown.40

Besides swapping material favours that, in the words of Chinese media, ‘warmed the hearts’ of the two peoples, Singapore’s assiduity in shaping public narrative about the cause, nature and development of the COVID-19 global pandemic away from anti-China directions went a long way towards improving China’s image and in turn China–Singapore relations at large. It is worth noting that the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has been hands on in fighting domestic Sinophobia sentiment and stemming the circulation of ethnicity-based disinformation about the coronavirus infection in the cyberspace. In as early as end January 2020, on a visit to the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, Prime Minister Lee publicly dismissed the approach of handling the coronavirus threat as if it was the ‘Chinese virus’ carried only by the Chinese. A week later, attending the Chinese New Year dinner at his Teck Ghee constituency on February 1, Lee reiterated his sympathy for the difficult COVID-19 situation that China found itself in, saying ‘[e]ven though the virus started in Wuhan, it doesn’t respect nationality or race-anybody can be infected and [the outbreak] is a problem that all countries must work together to solve’. He went on to lash out at anti-Chinese racism that also affected some overseas Singaporean in countries like Australia as ‘foolish and illogical’ (愚昧且不合逻辑的) in Mandarin. Singapore subsequently banned the usage of ‘Wuhan virus’ in all public discourses and investigated an Islamic teacher who linked the coronavirus to China’s religious policies and the allegedly lower-than-Muslim hygiene standards of the Chinese people. In a March interview with the CNN, Prime Minister Lee again railed against the Western call to hold China responsible for the pandemic and made it absolutely clear to the world that the global situation would not have improved if not for the right things China had done internally to combat the virus.41 Singapore’s foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan stood by Lee’s position and defended China during an interview with Sky News of Australia, a country that has been tirelessly mobilising international pressure on China about the origin of the coronavirus. Balakrishnan urged the world (and Australia) not to ‘politicise the process’ of inquiring into what happened with COVID-19 when the emergency phase is over and called China a ‘dependable’ partner of Singapore.42

40YOOZOO donates 600,000 SGD to support Singaporean students’ online studies during coronavirus lockdown. (2020).
41PM Lee Hsien Loong’s Interview with CNN, Prime Minister’s Office (Singapore) (2020).
42Kayla (2020).
10.6 Conclusion

The development of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore went through two phases. Between January and March, Singapore was the role model for the world regarding infection control. From April, Singapore became a cautionary story as the coronavirus was found to be spreading among its poorly treated foreign domestic workers. Singapore then prioritised dorm cases in its national response to the pandemic. Healthy workers were relocated to new premises, and the sick treated and taken care of. To flatten the curve, Singapore also enacted a national lockdown. Strict safe distancing measures were put in place. The lockdown was lifted in June but community cases rose slightly.

The Sino-Singaporean ties are inherently complex. Without exaggeration, the two countries are fierce competitors and ‘foes’ with respect to geopolitics and security but close customers and friends in relation to economics and trade. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, suggests that during difficult times like global public health emergencies, the dynamics of economic and humanitarian cooperation prevailed over the impulsion of geopolitical competition. As the US’s closest ally, Singapore did not take side with Washington over the issue of coronavirus disease, but joined hands with Beijing and other affected countries to tackle the common enemy. Both countries’ resolves to bring the COVID-19 under control have been remarkable. With the ardent defence of China and the Chinese by Singaporean leaders including of course Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself and mutual material and moral assistance throughout the outbreak period, the relationship between China and Singapore has been improved by the tragic pandemic crisis. Given the COVID-19, the two countries have agreed to incorporate bilateral cooperation in the management of public health crises at future JCBC meetings. The expansion of the mandate of the JCBC as a result of the unique experience of close cooperation in meeting common challenges can be a springboard to jumpstart a new phase of China-Singapore relations. What a way to commemorate 30 years of diplomatic relations by combatting COVID-19 side by side!

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