

Singapore National Day

From modest beginnings to modern state

Chin Siat Yoon
AMBASSADOR OF SINGAPORE

Aug. 9 marks the 51st anniversary of Singapore's independence. When independence came to us in 1965, it was not met with a sense of triumph but one of foreboding. I vividly remember the very difficult early years. The odds were stacked against us. Without natural resources, we could only rely on our wit and will to survive. The withdrawal by Britain of its forces from east of the Suez Canal starting in 1971 added greatly to our multitude of challenges.

Japan was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Singapore. Japanese companies were also

early investors in Singapore. These companies brought with them not only badly needed jobs and technology but also standards of excellence in planning, efficiency and quality. It is fair to say that Japan played an important role in helping lay the foundation of Singapore's economy.

This year is a key milestone to take stock of our bilateral relations because this year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Singapore and Japan, or SJ50. To mark this milestone year, Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan made an introductory visit to Japan from April 24 to 27. During the visit, he delivered the keynote speech at the 11th Japan-Singapore Symposium on April 26, the exact date that diplomatic relations between our two countries were established 50 years ago.

From modest beginnings, our relations have blossomed over the decades. Today, we enjoy strong political and economic ties and are partners in virtually every field of endeavor — trade and investment, third-country training programs, health care, cultural exchanges and others. This happy state of affairs did not happen by chance. It is the result of vision and hard work by leaders on both sides. In recognition of his contributions to Singapore-Japan bilateral relations, Singapore's founding Prime Minister, the late Lee Kuan Yew, has been conferred the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Paulownia Flowers by the Japanese government. We are deeply touched by this gesture.

Our political ties are founded on many shared strategic views and interests, and nurtured through regular exchanges between our leaders. Although

there is great disparity in size between our two countries, we have many things in common. Both Singapore and Japan are, for example, lacking natural resources; both are Asian trading nations and both are grappling with societal problems such as those associated with aging populations. These commonalities are a good basis for us to step up cooperation for mutual benefit. As for regular high-level visits, these are critical for enhancing mutual understanding. In this important year of SJ50, we have lined up a number of these visits, of which the introductory visit of our foreign minister was but the first. Visits in the pipeline include one by our Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong later this year.

On the economic front, ties are robust. Our participation in free trade networks has created opportunities for both economies. The Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement (JSEPA), entered into force in November 2002, is Japan's first-ever free trade agreement (FTA) and Singapore's first with a major trading partner. Since its inception, the JSEPA has promoted stability and predictability for business transactions, and enhanced the mutual attractiveness of both markets. Total bilateral trade between Singapore and Japan in 2015 reached 46.5 billion Singapore dollars. As of the end of 2015, there are more than 4,000 Japanese companies registered in Singapore. The JSEPA is currently undergoing a third review backed by our leaders. We look forward to its conclusion. As the pioneer FTA between us, the JSEPA should be updated to ensure that it continues to be a leading FTA.

People-to-people ties have also blossomed. Some 308,000 Singaporeans visited Japan in 2015; in other words, almost one in 10 Singaporeans visited

Japan last year alone. Likewise, 789,000 Japanese visited Singapore in 2015, making Japan the sixth-largest source of visitors and the top growth market in tourist spending for Singapore. To further boost tourism traffic, the Singapore Tourism Board and the Japan National Tourism Organization have signed their first memorandum of cooperation in January.

Singapore welcomes Japan's engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Japan has worked closely with ASEAN to advance regional peace, stability and prosperity, as well as to uphold a rules-based regional and international order. Japan has also been a valuable partner in helping ASEAN achieve its

goal of narrowing the development gap. We welcome Japan's recent expansion of financial assistance for infrastructure improvement and resource development in emerging economies through its "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" initiative. This will help to improve regional connectivity and close the infrastructure gap in Asia.

The current excellent state of bilateral relations is a reason for satisfaction, not complacency. As we look forward to the next 50 years, I am confident that we will continue to strengthen our bilateral relationship based on mutual respect and trust, and work together toward the common pursuit of peace, stability and prosperity for our countries and our region.



The Singapore Merlion on Sentosa Island SINGAPORE TOURISM BOARD



Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan (left) shakes hands with Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral relations on April 26. MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SINGAPORE

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to the People of
the Republic of Singapore
on the 51st Anniversary
of Their Independence

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