

Singapore national day

Excellent bilateral relationship continues to grow

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AMBASSADOR OF SINGAPORE



Singapore celebrates the 49th anniversary of its independence on Aug. 9, 2014.

Japan was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Singapore following our independence in 1965. I recall the early days of our independence. It was an extremely challenging time. Our economy was in dire straits and we were badly in need of foreign investment. Many Japanese companies were among the pioneer investors. Their presence helped make a difference and Japan became an important partner. In the decades that followed, the ties between our two countries have broadened and deepened.

Our political relations have continued to strengthen through frequent high-level exchanges between leaders of our two countries. Since 2013, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe have met five times, the latest during Prime Minister Abe's visit to Singapore in May to deliver the keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue.



Above, the iconic design of Marina Bay Sands has transformed Singapore's skyline. Right, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong meets with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on May 31 in Singapore. SINGAPORE TOURISM BOARD / MINISTRY OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION OF SINGAPORE

A glance at the calendar shows that there are many important visits, both incoming and outgoing, in the pipeline. Next month, we look forward to welcoming Minister, Prime Minister's Office, Second Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs Grace Fu to Japan for the World Assembly for Women: Tokyo 2014. The rate of female participation in the Singapore labor force is high. In fact, it has risen significantly over the past decade from 50.9 percent in 2003 to 58.1 percent in 2013. Singapore hopes to make constructive contributions to the debate in Japan about getting more women to join the workforce.

Besides the central government, we foster and cherish links with local governments. This adds depth to our bilateral relationship. For instance, then Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Culture, Community and Youth Sam Tan led a delegation to Kagoshima Prefecture in January this year to attend the 17th Singapore-Kagoshima Conference.

On the economic front, ties are robust. This is helped in no small way by the Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement (JSEPA), which our two countries entered into in 2002. The JSEPA is significant for Japan as it was the country's first free trade agreement. The JSEPA is renewed regularly to

ensure that it keeps pace with global economic developments. The third JSEPA review is currently taking place, with the backing and blessings of our prime ministers. We look forward to its early conclusion.

As of March 2014, total bilateral trade stood at \$12 billion Singaporean dollars, a 7.8 percent year-on-year increase. Japanese companies continue to have a strong presence in Singapore and there are currently more than 3,700 Japanese companies registered in Singapore. Both countries are also involved in various regional trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Eco-



nomic Partnership Agreement.

At the people-to-people level, the past years have seen greater interaction between both sides. In 2013, Singapore received 833,000 Japanese visitors — a 10 percent increase from 2012. Similarly in 2013, Japan welcomed about 189,200 Singaporeans. This was a 33.1 percent increase from 2012. Our students have also participated actively in the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS 2.0) program launched by Prime Minister Abe in January 2013. Singaporean students in the JENESYS 2.0 program have the opportunity to visit different parts of Japan to learn about local cultures, attractions and values. These partic-

ipants not only help to promote Singapore to Japan, but also the wonders of Japan to their fellow Singaporeans.

We look forward to the completion of Singapore's fourth and last reconstruction project in the Tohoku region early next year — a community town hall in Rikuzentakata funded by donations from Singaporeans in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Singapore's recent decision to lift restrictions on the import of food products from Fukushima Prefecture could also be helpful in rebuilding confidence in the disaster-struck region.

Singapore warmly welcomes the Abe administration's clear policy to step up Japan's engagement with ASEAN countries. In the same vein, ASEAN values its friendship with Japan. Japan was the second dialogue partner of ASEAN, and the first to post a resident ambassador to the group's secretariat in Jakarta. Japanese companies have also had a long history of association with ASEAN and have played a vital role in ASEAN member states' development. Many Japanese businesses have set up factories and offices in the region. The establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015, which boasts a combined market of some 600 million people, should prove a win-win situation for ASEAN and Japan.

I have had the opportunity

to visit many parts of Japan since taking up my post in April two years ago. My visits and conversations with Japanese leaders, officials and businesspeople have left me in no doubt that there remains much potential for relations

between Japan and Singapore to grow. As Singapore moves toward its 50th birthday next year, and its 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Japan in 2016, I am confident that both countries can achieve greater heights together.

Congratulations

to the People of

the Republic of Singapore

on the 49th Anniversary

of Their Independence



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