

The Evolution of Sino-Singaporean Relations: A Historical-geographical Perspective

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr Lim will explore China-Singapore relations from two seemingly contradictory trajectories – deepening geo-economic integration and differing geopolitical orientations. Once denigrated as a symbol of imperialist ‘running dogs’, Singapore became a governance ‘model’ for Chinese policymakers in the post-Mao era. Economic ties soon deepened. Since 2013, China became Singapore’s largest trading partner, and Singapore became the largest source of FDI in China. Following the launch of China’s ‘Go Abroad’ strategy in the early 2000s, Chinese FDI in Singapore grew exponentially. Singapore’s geo-economic importance became more pronounced following US policy to remove Hong Kong’s unique geopolitical status in 2020. There is every sign that Chinese enterprises are drawing on Singapore’s global interconnections to circumvent hostile trading policies. Sino-Singaporean relations are inherently fragile, however, because of different geopolitical orientations. The Singapore government has forged a close relationship with the US and is a frequent port-of-call for the US navy. It maintains military links with Taiwan, a polity that China regards as its domestic province. Singapore’s position on China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea is also aligned to those of ASEAN, within which contains much opposition to those claims. Dr Lim will therefore present the evolution of Sino-Singaporean relations as primarily shaped by broader geopolitical currents, with both countries seeking to leverage on economic opportunities while sidestepping, where possible, longstanding geopolitical differences.