

MARKING 50 YEARS OF RELATIONS

A long history and a bright future

German ambassador Michael Witter talks about the half century of Singapore-German relations. BY VINCENT WEE

BT: This is a significant year marking half a century of Singapore-German diplomatic relations. What are some of the events that have been organised and other important ways this occasion is being marked?

Mr Witter: Germany is proud of having been among the first states to recognise Singapore's independence in 1965 – in fact we already did so on Aug 14, 1965! This was combined with the offer to establish diplomatic relations as soon as possible, which was formalised on Nov 6, 1965. That's why we are not only celebrating SG50 this year, but also "SG-G-50" (with a "G" for Germany!)

The golden anniversary between Singapore and Germany brought a number of important political delegations from Singapore to Germany but also reciprocally from Germany to Singapore. In addition, a number of public events here in Singapore increased the awareness of German-Singaporean cooperation and that of the many German institutions here in Singapore.

The political highlight of the year was the visit of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his delegation, which included a number of ministers, to Germany in February. Mr Lee met German Chancellor Angela Merkel and a number of Cabinet ministers, giving German-Singaporean relations fresh impetus.

This impetus includes a closer cooperation with the German Federal State of Saxony. Mr Lee met the state's prime minister in Dresden and, among others, learned about Germany's best practices in vocational education and training.

Other important visitors from Singapore followed, such as Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan, who visited Germany in his then capacity as Minister for the Environment and Water Resources. He participated in a Bonn conference in preparation for the Paris Climate Conference.

From the German side, the Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen visited Singapore, where she met Minister of Defence Ng Eng Hen and participated in the Shangri La Dialogue. Together with the High Representative of the European Union, Federica Mogherini, she sent a clear signal of strong EU interest in the stability of the region.



“Our relations are particularly close in the economic sphere . . . The number of German companies in Singapore has tripled in the last decade to more than 1,500 German companies active in Singapore today.”

Ambassador Witter

Other visitors from Germany in 2015 were the prime minister of the German Federal State of Hesse and president of the Federal Council Volke Bouffier, bringing a 50-person delegation to explore future cooperation in the fields of science and business, and the deputy prime minister of Baden Wurttemberg Nils Schmid, who came to Singapore to honour 50 years of our diplomatic relations as well as the German Centre's 20th year jubilee.

In order to include the public and to raise the visibility of the relationship, the embassy cooperated with a number of German institutions in Singapore in the organisation of events marking the golden jubilee.

A public "German-Singaporean Jubilee Picnic & Concert" at the end of September at the Singapore Botanic Gardens brought more than 2,000 visitors. We wanted to give all the approximately 8,000 Germans living in Singapore and all their Singaporean friends the possibility to celebrate with us SG-G-50 and also 25 years of Germany's reunification. The picnic featured German singer Meta Hueper performing together with the NUS Jazz Band and Singapore's Vernon Cornelius, as well as the choir of the German European School Singapore. We also put together a well-received photo exhibition on "50 years of German-Singaporean Diplomatic Relations" in cooperation with the German Association-Deutsches Haus, which was shown at the Paragon Shopping Centre on Orchard Road as well as the Toa Payoh Public Library and is currently on display at the German Centre in Jurong East. It showcases the intensity of our relations in the diplomatic, cultural and economic fields, but also tells the story of people-to-people ties. I personally enjoyed looking at the pictures depicting the deep friendship between the late former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt over the years. The exhibition also shows less well-known facts about the contributions of German companies to Singapore, for example, that it was a German company, Melchers, which built the Singapore Flyer.

Further highlights included two concerts by the German a-capella group Ensemble Nobles and a "race-car live-painting event" with the German speed painter Armin Flossdorf at the residence of the German ambassador. We organised this event also to give something back to the Singaporean society which has received us Germans so well, and we are proud that the event raised S\$10,000 for the SPD (previously known as the Society for the Physically Disabled).

We are now looking forward to a special jubilee concert by the renowned German cellist Jan Vogler and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra at the Esplanade on Nov 14, which will be supported by the Goethe Institute.

How has the nature of Singapore-German relations developed over the years as the respective countries have also grown and gone through different phases?

Mr Witter: The relationship with Singapore covers a broad range of facets, has known many different phases and is also much longer than just 50 years old. Behn, Meyer & Co, a trading, shipping and insurance company, is Germany's oldest firm established in Singapore, dating back to 1840! The global company Siemens has been operating in Singapore since 1908. And probably the oldest German institution in Singapore is the German Association, which was founded as Teutonia Club over 150 years ago in 1856. Certainly, there have been ups and downs, in particular as an effect of two world wars

Since Singapore's independence, changing geopolitical factors and global challenges have defined and transformed the areas of political cooperation. The unified Germany has progressively taken on a role of greater responsibility in Europe and beyond. We also have been shifting more and more competencies towards the European Union to strengthen the EU's common foreign and security policies. We are actively working together with Singapore – both on the bilateral level and in multilateral fora – to find solutions for the world's most pressing international problems.

Recently, we agreed on a new cooperation in security policy. Furthermore, we are engaged in promoting stronger ties between the European Union and Asean and we are seeking to intensify EU-Singapore relations towards a strategic partnership. Our strong bonds, however, go far beyond the relations of governments and diplomats.

Our relations are particularly close in the economic sphere. Both Germany and Singapore have gone through different phases of economic development, from labour-intensive to now R&D and innovation-driven. These changes have also influenced the economic cooperation between our countries.

Nowadays, there has been an increase in investments from German MNCs and SMEs in the chemicals, biomedical sciences, electronics, engineering and logistics fields. German foreign direct investment stock in Singapore is about S\$15 billion. The number of German companies in Singapore has tripled in the last decade to more than 1,500 German companies active in Singapore today. They have been assisted by German institutions such as the German Centre, which has been helping German small and medium-sized companies to establish themselves in Singapore for 20 years already, and the Singaporean-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (SGC), which has been promoting our economic ties for more than 10 years.

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We are also lucky to have strong partnerships and regular exchanges at all levels of the scientific, educational, technological and cultural fields. Well-known German institutions in the scientific field are the Singapore outlets of the Technical University of Munich, TUM Asia and its research cluster TUM Create as well as the renowned Fraunhofer Institute. In the educational sphere, we are proud to also count on the German European School Singapore, which is providing education until the Abitur or IB level in German and English for more than 1,500 children, and the German Academic Exchange Service offering competent advice on study and research opportunities in Germany. Our cultural relations owe very much to the Goethe Institute, which has successfully profiled German art, design and culture and offers excellent and increasingly popular German language classes.

BT: What strikes you as being the most dramatic changes during this period?

Mr Witter: The biggest challenge for Germany over the past decades was to redefine ourselves after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification 25 years ago. We regained full sovereignty and had to redefine our role in international relations based on the trust of our partners. The deepening European integration and the introduction of the euro as the single currency in the eurozone was another dramatic change for Germany.

Singapore, on the other hand, also changed at an unprecedented pace. The Singapore success story over the past 50 years is highly impressive. Singapore is now a regional hub and a financial centre and is also sought-after and relevant as a mediator and partner in the international political sphere. It is not surprising that it has a driving role as Asean is growing closer together.

BT: What is the future of bilateral relations between the two countries?

Mr Witter: German-Singaporean cooperation is striving in many areas and I am convinced that there is the potential for even greater collaboration in the future, be it in diplomacy, business, culture, science or education. Examples are our cooperation in the field of dual education and our reinforced exchanges on security policy. We cannot separate our bilateral relations completely from the future of our multilateral relations. Germany and the European Union have a genuine strategic interest in strengthening their relationship with Asean, a major contributor to stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Germany very much welcomes the recent EU approach for an enlarged partnership with a strategic purpose between EU and Asean. Germany supports the European Union's dedication further to intensify its relations with Asean and to strengthen its role in other regional fora: We believe that EU has a lot to offer. The EU and Germany are ready to share their experience in regional economic cooperation and integration, as well as in regional confidence and security-building measures.



The opening of the photo exhibition "50 years of German-Singaporean Diplomatic Relations" at Paragon Shopping Centre. The exhibits showcase ties in the diplomatic, cultural and economic fields, as well as tell the story of people-to-people links.

BT: What are the areas of cooperation with the most potential?

Mr Witter: One of the most forward-looking areas is our cooperation in the field of vocational education and training. PM Lee has recognised the importance of non-academic education and lifelong learning for Singapore's future. As a country with a long tradition in skill-based education, we are glad to share our experiences with Singapore and help to adapt them to Singaporean needs.

During PM Lee's visit to Germany, the prime minister witnessed various agreements signed between Singapore and Dresden schools and companies. We recently signed two MOUs

strengthening German-Singaporean cooperation with regards to Singapore's Skills Future initiative. One programme, called "Poly goes UAS" aims at sending polytechnic graduates to Germany to study at a German University of Applied Science while at the same time working in a German "Mittelstand" company. The participating "hidden champions" are among the 1,500 German companies in Singapore.

The second programme will be run under the "Poly goes SIT" scheme. In cooperation with German companies in Singapore, the Singapore Institute of Technology developed courses comparable to the German dual education to equip students with the skills they need to remain competitive in a globalised world.

Our cooperation just kicked off with a handful of German companies in Singapore participating. There is potential for more companies – not only from Germany, but from Singapore and other countries – to join these programmes and to enhance dual education in Singapore. This will not only deepen cooperation in the field of education but also our economic ties.

There are many other exciting opportunities for cooperation out there, particularly in the field of research and development and business partnerships. I am convinced that the close Singaporean-German ties will be expanding even further in the decades ahead!