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# International Relations of the Asia-Pacific

## The quest for recognition: Taiwan's military and trade agreements with Singapore under the one-China policy

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### Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Taiwan's relationship with Singapore since the 1960s as a unique case study in the Asia-Pacific. The theoretical concept of recognition in international relations (IR) and its nexus with international law are used to analyze the conclusion of the bilateral military and trade agreements absent diplomatic relations. The article argues that beyond security dimensions, the two states' struggles for recognition exhibit the formation of national identities, which invigorate the claims for sovereign state status in global politics. First, this article explores the emerging notion of recognition in IR and sheds light on the significance of Taiwan's presidential visit to Singapore under its one-China policy. Second, it explains Singapore's pursuit of external sovereignty that led to substantive defense cooperation with Taiwan, as well as the role of Lee Kuan Yew in facilitating Beijing-Taipei negotiations. Finally, it assesses contemporary developments such as the inking of the Taiwan-Singapore free trade agreement and the first-ever summit between the presidents of China and Taiwan in Singapore. Hence, the political and legal analysis of Singapore-Taiwan relations enriches the study of IR and contributes to the understanding of the foreign policy of China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The evolution of the Taiwan–Singapore relationship since the 1960s has been an extraordinary case of international relations (IR) in the Asia–Pacific. Notwithstanding Singapore’s one–China policy that diplomatically recognizes the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, and Singapore have developed substantial relations, including the conclusion of military and trade agreements (Jayakumar, 2011; Magcamit and Tan, 2014). The long–standing bilateral cooperation was built on high–level official exchanges and led to Singapore’s critical role in cross–strait negotiations. A thorough understanding of Taiwan’s relations with Singapore is vital to the foreign policy of the new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government of Taiwan and post–Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) Singapore. Similarly profound, the political and legal analyses contribute to the understanding of the diplomacy of China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Through the concept of recognition in IR, the article offers a fresh examination of Taiwan’s defense and economic partnership with Singapore in the absence of diplomatic recognition. In particular, the article analyzes the extent to which Taiwan and Singapore have grounded their distinctive identities in the interstate relationship associated with their desired status, which led to the bilateral military and trade agreements. It argues that beyond security dimensions, the two countries’ ‘struggles for recognition’ exhibit the formation of national identities separate from the ‘Chinese identity’, thus prompting the claims for sovereign state status in IR (Lindemann and Ringmar, 2012; Daase *et al.*, 2015). To substantiate the contention, the article provides theoretical explanations and employs the most recent materials unveiled by senior statesmen with first–hand experience.

Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework for the multifaceted notion of recognition. It explores the concept of recognition illuminated by Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar and identifies the empirical approach to study the recognition issues in IR and international law (Lindemann, 2012). Section 3 sheds light on the transformation of Taiwan’s Chinese identity and its claim for sovereign state status in foreign policy. The presidential visits to Singapore serve as a key case for Taiwan’s claim to be treated as an equal member in the international community. Section 4 discusses the formation of Singapore’s national identity and its pursuit of external sovereignty by forging the defense link with Taiwan. It also explains Singapore’s unique role in facilitating Beijing–Taipei talks in Singapore. Section 5 assesses the conclusion of the free trade agreement (FTA), along with the first–ever summit between presidents of China and

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## 2 Theoretical concepts of recognition

This article explores the concept of recognition and investigates the evolution of the Taiwan–Singapore relationship. Recognition is a multidimensional notion embedded in political theory, IR, and international law. Without exhausting the meanings of the philosophic foundation of recognition, this article aims to empirically operationalize the core elements of the emerging IR concept of recognition and its nexus with international law. IR recognition theorists contribute their distinct understanding of interstate relations to G.W.F. Hegel's theory of recognition (Wendt, 2003; Greenhill, 2008; Lindemann, 2012; Onuf, 2013). Hegel explained the interactions between social subjects by examining how human beings' pursuit of recognition has motivated human actions. His idea of mutual recognition was based on the claim that '[s]elf-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only as something acknowledged' (Hegel, 1977, p. 111). In other words, the existence of the 'self' is defined by and hinges on recognition by the 'other'.

Hegel stressed that the process of gaining recognition is by no means straightforward. The struggle for recognition is famously depicted in his master–slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which details the master's desire for recognition of his superior position not just by the slave but also by the peers whom the master deems equal (Ringmar, 1995; Hayden and Schick, 2016). Only upon receiving reciprocal recognition, self-consciousness can be established and freedom and self-certainty can be secured. Interpretations of Hegel's struggle for recognition by scholars, such as Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, have profoundly influenced the political theory that energized post-WWII social and democratic movements (Blunden, 2007; Onuf, 2013).

While the extensive literature on political theory focuses predominantly on the struggle for recognition within states and societies, IR scholars in the past decade began to explore the 'new' dimension of recognition in international politics (Geis *et al.*, 2015; Hayden and Schick, 2016). The 'constructivist turn' first invigorated the cross-disciplinary transfer of the concept of recognition to IR (Erman, 2013; Fehl, 2015; Geis *et al.*, 2015). As Alexander Wendt contended, an understanding of interstate relations should go beyond the realist assumption that states struggle for security in an anarchy (Wendt, 2003). Instead, the desire for recognition is critical to shaping the state behavior. Drawing from political theorists' reading of Hegel's recognition theory, an emerging group of IR scholars, including Lindemann and Ringmar in particular, has

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the nexus between IR and international law in the realm of recognition ([Ringmar, 1995](#); [Lindemann, 2012](#); [Erman, 2013](#); [Iser, 2015](#)). Misrecognition that denies recognition of states' identity and status will give rise to clashes, whereas mutual recognition between states is expected to lead to cooperative gains ([Wolf, 2011](#); [Gustafsson, 2015](#)).

The conventional approach to decipher recognition is through the perspective of identity. Associating the politics of recognition with 'identity politics' is rooted in Hegel's concept that identity construction is developed 'dialogically through a process of mutual recognition' ([Fraser, 2003](#), pp. 23–24). Recognition denotes an intersubjective social process in which an individual pursues others' acknowledgement of his or her identity and such recognition is indispensable to constituting the 'self' ([Greenhill, 2008](#); [Onuf, 2013](#)). IR scholars who subscribed to constructivist ontology transplanted the model of identity politics to analyze interstate relations and examined the role of states' psychological needs in prompting state actions ([Wendt, 2003](#); [Geis et al., 2015](#)).

Identity is a fluid concept subject to change because of historical and political surroundings. A state's self-image or self-identity is based on its constituents' own self-affirming values and the state's psychological needs attribute to such common values. Honneth explained that 'the constitution itself is a principles-based interpretation of' collective national identity that obliges the government to realize the psychological demand for recognition ([Honneth, 2012](#), p. 31). A denial of recognition occurs when the state's self-image does not correspond to how it is perceived and treated by other states. To parallel the social process, the struggle for recognition in IR is the practice in which states attempt to garner recognition from important others in order to have their self-constructed identities confirmed at the world stage ([Murray, 2010](#); [Hummel, 2012](#); [Hagstrom and Gustafsson, 2015](#)). As Lindemann pointed out, this identity-based pursuit of recognition is essentially the 'struggle for prestige' ([Lindemann, 2012](#), p. 210). The state behavior can be motivated by a nation's attempt to gain the acknowledgement of its unique or superior identity such as a 'great power' other than security or other material considerations.

Notably, recognition does not narrowly encompass identity construction based on the constructivist interpretation. An equally crucial, yet often-ignored, element of recognition is the status claim, which represents the normative instead of psychological dimension of the struggle for recognition ([Lindemann, 2013](#); [Geis et al., 2015](#); [Iser, 2015](#)).

While both identity construction and the status claim underline the quest for self-esteem, the latter does not stress the distinct or unique self-image but the desire to be treated as a normal member pursuant to 'a socially accepted and generally

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shift from identity to status recognition, which delved into how struggles originate from the misrecognition of social status in specific situations ([Geis et al., 2015](#); [Hayden and Schick, 2016](#)). To remedy the inequalities, her justice-based 'principle of participatory parity' rests on 'the condition of being a peer, of being on a par with others, of standing on an equal footing' ([Fraser, 2003](#), p. 101; [Blunden, 2007](#), pp. 92–96; [Fehl, 2015](#), pp. 109–110).

In interstate relations, the status claim can be interpreted as the 'struggle for dignity' that strives to obtain self-esteem by securing equal status in the international community ([Wolf, 2011](#); [Lindemann, 2012](#); [Onuf, 2013](#)). The denial of recognition in this sense means the suffering of discriminatory treatment under normative standards of consideration, which will affect the legitimacy of a state or government. Such standards do not concern whether they correspond to a state's self-identity, but are judged upon whether the state is treated on par with its peer countries.

Distinct from the lens of identity that centers on a state's quest for confirmation of its superior identity from 'others', the crux of the status claim is a state's desire to be recognized as an equal member in bilateral and multilateral interactions. In political reality, a state's self-stigmatized and self-glorified image may be a result of its status in the international order or the self-identity energizes the state to pursue a certain status that it deems equal to its peers. Thus, identity and status, which collectively form the struggle for recognition, are interrelated and cannot be categorically separated in state practice.

To crystalize and operationalize the concept of recognition, IR recognition theorists have not only derived essential elements of recognition from political theory but have also attempted to build the missing link between IR and international law in the overlapping arena of recognition. Legal recognition means that an existing state formally expresses 'the willingness of their state to treat with a new state or government or to accept that consequences, either factual or legal, flow from a new situation' ([Grant, 1999](#), p. xix). Hence, legal recognition applies to state recognition and government recognition. In the case of Taiwan, both forms of recognition are closely intertwined. Arguably, legal recognition based on falsifiable criteria is distinct from the empirically fluid concept of recognition in IR. While legal recognition is a zero-sum exercise, recognition in IR involves a matter of degree of intersubjective affinity. As a basic form of recognition, legal recognition is fulfilled when it is officially conferred by other countries, but the struggle for recognition in IR reaches beyond the point of legal recognition and is often a continuous process ([Iser, 2015](#); [Oeter, 2015](#)).

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The legal discourse on recognition has centered on two rival views (Crawford, 2012). The declaratory doctrine perceives the existence of a state as a fact and the act of recognition merely constitutes a declaratory statement of the state's existence without influencing its statehood. A state's political existence is therefore 'independent of recognition by the other states' (Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, 1933). Yet, the constitutive view holds that the statehood and associated rights and obligations are conditional on other states' recognition as a sovereign state. This view originated from Hegel's concept of mutual recognition that an entity's sovereign power is determined 'in the eyes of others, i.e. to be recognized by them' (Hegel, 1991, p. 331). While the majority of international lawyers support the declaratory view, IR scholars urge to develop the constitutive doctrine by studying recognition and statehood from identity and status perspectives (Bartelson, 2013; Erman, 2013; Fabry, 2013).

As Ringmar pointed out, Hegel not only perceived a state as an autonomous actor in international law but also as a product of consent collectively conferred by its nationals (Ringmar, 1995). The need to be recognized concerns sovereignty, which constitutes the foundation of self-identity and represents legal personality of statehood (Crawford, 1976, 2012; Bartelson, 2013). In other words, recognition in IR and international law has shared commitments to the principle of sovereignty. The provocative politics of identity often gives rise to the desire for sovereignty. Once a state fulfils citizens' request for recognition of the self-constructed identity as a sovereign, it is deemed to have the supreme authority over its land and is entitled to certain sovereign rights in international law. For instance, such sovereign rights enshrined in the *Charter of the United Nations* include territorial integrity, political independence and sovereign equality (Charter of the United Nations, 1945).

Compared with identity, the IR concept of status is even more closely intertwined with international law. A constructive understanding of interstate relations implicates that recognition is essential for a political entity to possess and assert an external normative status, which often equates with legal status in international law (Erman, 2013). Statehood is thus defined as having a status as an autonomous state and depends on reciprocal recognition (Fabry, 2013). Eva Erman further elaborated that the element of status in recognition not only involves statehood per se but instead the exercise of the capacity of statehood that empowers a self-determining political entity (Erman, 2013). Particularly for Taiwan, the extent of dignity that the president receives in a diplomatic visit is vital to recognition of statehood because the head of state 'personalizes' the state in international law (Watts, 2010). Another key area to demonstrate that the capacity of statehood can be effectively exercised is the conclusion of treaties. A treaty refers to 'an

of whether an entity 'possesses capacity to conclude treaties' is often contingent on its recognized status as a state ([Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, 1969](#), article 6).

### 3 Taiwan's quest for recognition

Based on the IR concept of recognition, this article contends that Taiwan and Singapore's struggles for recognition are rooted in the shift from the Chinese identity to their distinct national identities, which have galvanized the pursuit of their sovereign state status. While the main challenge for Singapore is recognition in IR, Taiwan's struggles lie in recognition in international law and in IR, which includes the core elements of identity and status. De-recognition of the Republic of China (ROC) in global politics and Taiwan's democratization movement have crystalized the Taiwanese identity, which has gradually departed from the Chinese identity ([Li, 2013](#); [Lin, 2016](#); [Zhong, 2016](#)).

The Kuomintang (KMT)'s loss of Mainland China to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 and the 1991 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 that transferred the 'China' seat from the ROC to the PRC rendered Taiwan's status an 'entity *sui generis*'. The ROC on Taiwan was deprived of the membership of all UN agencies and is currently diplomatically recognized by only 21 states such as Panama and Vatican ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs Taiwan, 2016](#)). From a technical aspect, recognition of the ROC involves government recognition rather than state recognition, as 'the state of China' remains unchanged regardless of the change of governments. Countries that recognize the ROC deem it to be 'the government of China', instead of recognizing Taiwan as a separate state. Yet, from the judicial perspective that determines Taiwan's legal status for functional purposes such as sovereign immunity, the courts often resort to the declaratory doctrine by assessing whether Taiwan meets the statehood criteria in international law ([Hsieh, 2007](#)). Notably, the ROC's position has always been that it is a sovereign state. The fact that neither the KMT nor the DPP government officially declared 'Taiwan' to be an independent state has no impact on the statehood issue, as a declaration of independence is not a statehood requirement under the *Montevideo Convention*.

The two-Chiang's regime of the KMT (Chiang Kai-shek and his son and successor, [Chiang Shin-kuo](#)) imposed the Chinese identity on Taiwan with the purpose of eliminating Taiwanese' Japanese identity as a result of half a century of Japanese colonial rule. They insisted that both Mainland China and Taiwan are part of China and



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suffrage during the presidency of Lee Teng-hui brought about the constructivist turn in Taiwanese identity. From 1992 to 2016, Taiwanese's Chinese identity plummeted from 25.5% to 4.1%, whereas the Taiwanese identity soared from 17.6% to 59.3% (Chen, 2016). Honneth's claim that the constitution can be conceived as the interpretation of national identity also explains the amendments, ratified in the 1990s, to the ROC Constitution that confines constitutional rights to Taiwan. Article 11 of the amendments specifically recognizes the legal status of 'the Chinese mainland area', thus altering the unrealistic official position as the *de jure* Chinese government.

The premise of identity politics is that the existence of the 'self' is conditioned on recognition by others. Singapore thus functions as the particular 'other' for Taiwan's psychological demands for acknowledging its national identity. With more than a 40-year close relationship in defense and economic arenas, Taiwan and Singapore have made their interactions a unique case in IR. Tellingly, Singapore's establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing in 1990 denotes recognition of the PRC as the sole government of China. Nevertheless, under 'its' one-China policy, Singapore has in practice perceived Taiwan as a *de facto* government separate from the PRC. Its strategic ambiguity without defining Taiwan's status has enabled Singapore to maintain relations with both Beijing and Taipei. In contrast with the legal approach of the United States, neither Singapore's diplomatic communiqué with the PRC nor domestic legislation mentions Taiwan or accords it with a particular standing. For instance, the diplomatic privileges accorded to Taiwanese diplomats or Taiwan's representative office are based on the established reciprocal practice (Ku, 1995). As an extraordinary anomaly in IR, Taiwan and Singapore have developed substantive ties on a non-recognition basis and the degree of such ties often exceed that of formal diplomatic relations.

The emerging Taiwanese identity has promoted Taipei to seek recognition of its sovereign state status. Such recognition is beyond legal recognition and centers on status recognition in IR that ensures the 'parity of participation' in global politics. Lee Teng-hui's pragmatic policy in the 1990s was the pioneering initiative to break Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. A presidential trip to foreign countries is a paramount symbol of recognition of a nation's status. As the head of state represents the country in international law, the extent of dignity he or she receives relates to the exercise of the capacity of statehood. It is particularly significant to Taiwan, as it has been a challenge for Taiwan presidents to travel to countries without official diplomatic relations.

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Against this background, the high-profile visit of former president Lee Teng-hui to Singapore based on the normal standards of a 'state visit' serves as the bedrock of

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initially for defense cooperation (Lee, 2000). LKY's invitation to Lee, Chiang's successor, to visit Singapore substantially helped the isolated Taiwan government buttress its normative claim to be treated as a sovereign state. The trip also affirmed Lee's pragmatic policy and strengthened his political legitimacy, given that he just succeeded Chiang after his sudden death in 1988 (Hickey, 2007).

As the first Taiwan president to visit ASEAN countries, Lee's four-day visit took place in March 1989 (Chiu, 2010). For Singapore, receiving Lee reinforced the military cooperation and minimized the impact on bilateral ties after Singapore's recognition of the PRC. LKY extended Lee 'all the personal courtesies due to a visiting head of state' without formal diplomatic protocol (Lee, 2000, pp. 628–629). Although Singapore officially addressed Lee as the president 'from Taiwan' rather than 'of Taiwan', Lee regarded this arrangement as 'not satisfactory, yet acceptable' (Chiu, 2010, p. 38; Lee, 2000, pp. 628–629). The carefully chosen wording may reflect Singapore's delicate balance between according Taiwan status recognition in IR and avoiding implied recognition of Taiwan in international law. Moreover, LKY held a private meeting with Lee in the Istana (Singapore's presidential residence and office), and both Singapore President Wee Kim Wee's invitation letter and the dinner menu included Lee's title, 'President of the Republic of China' (Chiu, 2010; Chin, 2016). These arrangements escalated the status of Taiwan in the region and continued the connections with Singapore's next generation leaders.

More than two decades later, LKY's death led to the second high-level visit to Singapore. In 2015, former Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou flew to Singapore to pay his respects to LKY at the family's private wake in the Istana (Hung and Lee, 2015). Diplomatic complexities prevented Ma from attending the state funeral with representatives from China and other states. Nevertheless, Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong's arrangement for Ma's visit as a 'family friend' made the trip possible and reiterated Singapore's pragmatic approach to Taiwan (The Economist, 2015).

## 4 The diplomacy of Singapore

Other than security dimensions, the IR notion of recognition offers an account of Singapore's foreign policy on remaining substantial relations with Taiwan without diplomatic recognition. Singapore's identity construction and status claim, which collectively underline its struggle for recognition, have been due to its vulnerability as a tiny nation. After British colonial rule, Singapore's merger with Malaysia ended with the

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accidental independence in 1965, constructing non-race-based national identity became critical to the nation-building process (Ortmann, 2009; Yong, 2016).

Kuala Lumpur's swift recognition of Singapore and its admission to the UN minimized the legal recognition obstacle, but recognition of Singapore's distinct identity that is entitled to sovereign equality remains a political challenge. Markedly, Singapore's major Chinese population features the distinction from other Southeast Asian nations. To be perceived by Islamic neighbors, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, as the 'third China' could danger Singapore's external security and shatter the internal solidarity of multiracial communities (Jayakumar, 2011, pp. 266–267). Consequently, formulating a national identity independent of the Chinese identity became a priority for the People's Action Party (PAP). Similar to Taiwan, Singapore has ground its identity in IR associated with the desired status as a fully acknowledged sovereign state. This has shaped Singapore's diplomacy that ensures its exercise of sovereign rights in international law without succumbing to pressure from regional powers such as China.

## 4.1 Military assistance from Taiwan

Following Singapore's independence, building its own military force became a notable symbol of national identity and sovereignty. The tensions with Malaysia and the communist threat in Southeast Asia galvanized the PAP government to seek foreign assistance for national defense. The trustworthiness of the former colonial power, Britain, was in doubt because it had substantial commercial interests in Malaysia (Chin, 2016). Neither could the United States be an option, as it was deeply trapped in the Vietnam War. Israeli military advisors offered assistance. Yet, this dependence on Israel could worsen Singapore's geopolitical situation amid the anti-Israel sentiments in neighboring countries (Chin, 2016).

Singapore's dilemma of receiving defense assistance could be perceived as a form of misrecognition of its identity because its sovereign equality was not fully acknowledged. In this regard, Taiwan acted as the 'other' that helped affirm Singapore's identity by providing military aid. As senior ROC military officers had combat experiences with Japanese and the Chinese Communist forces, they could provide pragmatic advice. More importantly, Taipei's isolation after UN Resolution 2758 and its anti-communist stance made it eager to develop closer ties with Singapore.

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Long-standing military cooperation has been built on mutual recognition of Taiwan and Singapore's identity and status. Based on the bilateral dialogues since 1967, Taiwanese

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help build the Singapore navy. Among military officers 'seconded' to Singapore, Major General Liu Chin-Chuan of Taiwan's Air Force and Captain Chiu Yong-An of the Navy represent the most noteworthy cases (Qu, 2012; Chin, 2016). Originally from Malaysia, they not only took part in Singapore-based training but also became Singapore's first Chiefs of Air Force and Navy, respectively (Qu, 2012; Chin, 2016). In 1975, LKY's meeting with Chiang Chin-kuo led to the signing of the Training Protocol (Lee, 2000; Chiu, 2010). Commonly known for its code name 'Operation Starlight' or 'Starlight Exercise' (*Xing Guang Ji Hua*), the troops of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) wear Taiwanese army uniforms and receive training in military bases in Taiwan. The number of troops reached 15,000 in the 1980s, but was reduced to lower than 3,000 because of the increase in Singapore's overseas training bases (Chuang, 2007; Tan, 2011; Chan, 2016).

As an 'open secret', the scale of defense cooperation between Taiwan and Singapore is rarely seen in non-diplomatic relations. Taiwan's military assistance has helped reinforce Singapore's national identity, which is intertwined with sovereign rights, including territorial integrity and political independence. Concluding politically salient defense agreements also confirmed what Erman called the 'exercise of the capacity of statehood', which is indispensable for status recognition. Notably, the offering of the military training assistance on a 'non-commercial rate' brought practical benefits to Taiwan (Lee, 2000). Although Singapore did not concede to Taipei's request for legal recognition, the enhanced interactions such as high-level talks and the establishment of a representative office in Singapore in 1969 raised the political status of Taiwan.

The PAP government has deemed the military link with Taiwan decisive for fortifying Singapore's security and sovereignty, but the link posed a challenge to normalize relations with China. In the 1970s, Beijing initially denied the recognition of Singapore's independent status by denouncing it as the 'running dog' of American imperialism (Lee, 2000; Leifer, 2000). China's progressive exportation of the proletarian revolution to Southeast Asia also made Singapore's contact with Beijing extra-cautious. While the situation changed after Deng Xiaoping's visit to Singapore in 1978 and China's economic reform, Singapore carefully sought to minimize geopolitical tensions by being the last ASEAN country to recognize the PRC. Thus, Singapore only signed the diplomatic communique with China in 1990 after Indonesian President Suharto's decision to normalize relations with Beijing.

When Singapore Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam discussed with his Chinese counterparts, the PRC's relatively 'tolerant' stance on SAF training in Taiwan paved the way for LKY's meeting with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in 1976 (Leifer, 2000; Desker

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Ong Teng Cheong to seek Taipei's understanding of new relations with Beijing ([Lee, 2011](#)). The joint diplomatic communiqué neither recognized nor acknowledged Taiwan as part of China and Beijing acquiesced to Singapore's continuation of the military and official exchanges with Taipei ([Koh, 1998](#); [Lee, 2000](#)).

Arguably, China's exceptional concessions to Singapore in the 1990s could be attributed to its keen desire to improve its 'peaceful rise' image and to substantiate relations with ASEAN. Singapore thus created a unique precedent for the one-China policy without having sacrificed its sovereign rights to maintain substantive ties with Taiwan. In November 2016, Hong Kong customs seized the nine SAF armored vehicles, which were shipped by a commercial carrier bound for Singapore after training in Taiwan ([Torode and Zaharia, 2016](#)). It was alleged that Beijing would use the seizure to pressure Singapore to change its stance on South China Sea disputes and cut military ties with Taiwan, thus confining the international space of the DPP government ([Chan, 2016](#)). Hence, it would be significant to observe whether Singapore's interpretation of its one-China principle could cope with the increasingly assertive Xi Jinping administration.

## 4.2 Singapore's role in cross-strait negotiations

Recognition theory explains the uniqueness of Taiwan-Singapore military ties in IR and refutes the conventional understanding that the lack of diplomatic recognition significantly confines the bilateral relationship. The notion of recognition in IR also provides a fresh examination of Singapore's diplomacy that facilitates negotiations between Beijing and Taipei. For Singapore, providing a neutral forum for cross-strait meetings avoids being perceived as the 'third China'. Offering good offices to the two sides of the Taiwan Strait strengthens Singapore's pursuit of prestige and helps forge the Singaporean identity. Its claim for sovereign state status would also be fortified, as the value of the small nation in regional politics could be well recognized by super powers. For the ROC government, holding politically sensitive dialogues with the PRC through Singapore, a 'foreign' country, similarly buttressed the recognition of Taiwan's status on par with China.

By according Taiwan recognition of equal respect, LKY's role in cross-strait negotiations reinforced the defense and economic partnership. As the only mandarin-speaking foreign leader with systemic contact with PRC and ROC presidents, LKY was a rare channel between the two sides. Remarkably, LKY made 33 and 25 trips to China and Taiwan, respectively ([Yamada, 2015](#)). Different from former Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui's high-profile visit to Singapore, LKY's schedules in Taipei were usually under the

kuo's funeral in 1988 also illustrates their personal relationship ([The Straits Times, 1988](#)).

LKY's ties with Chiang and regular trips to Taiwan were known to Beijing. When LKY met with Deng Xiaoping in 1985, Deng expressed his intention to 'cooperate with Chiang' on Chinese reunification and sent his regards to Chiang, who was Deng's old 'schoolmate' and LKY's 'good friend' ([Lee, 2000](#), pp. 679–682). Chiang did not respond when LKY conveyed Deng's message to him presumably because of his entrenched distrust of the CCP, aggravated by the insecurity after US de-recognition of the ROC. The situation fundamentally changed after Lee altered Chiang's 'Three No's' policy (no contact, no compromise, and no negotiation with Beijing).

In 1991, Taiwan and China established respective quasi-governmental organizations, the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS), respectively ([Hsieh, 2016](#)). LKY's role as an interlocutor between Lee and PRC president Yang Shangkun facilitated the first SEF-ARATS meeting ([Tzou, 2001](#)). Although Beijing insisted that Taiwan issues are 'family' affairs in which no foreign countries should intervene, LKY and Singapore's unique role could minimize the internationalization of cross-strait talks ([Prime Minister's Office Singapore, 2014](#)). The 1993 'Koo-Wang meeting', which refers to the meeting between the SEF and ARATS chairpersons, Koo Chen-fu and Wang Daohan, took place in Singapore. During the unprecedented cross-strait meeting since 1949, two sides concluded four agreements that underpinned the legal basis for subsequent negotiations.

Significantly, the limitation on Singapore's role has been the versatile dynamic of cross-strait relations because Singapore could only 'be asked' to be the facilitator by the two sides. This factor is critical to the success of the Koo-Wang meeting and the failure of the shipping joint venture (including shares from China, Singapore and Taiwan), which Taipei proposed in 1995 ([Tzou, 2001](#)). While LKY regarded the cross-strait stability essential to Singapore, he claimed that Chinese reunification would be inevitable, as Washington will not defend Taiwan ([Lee, 2011, 2013](#)). His belief conflicted with Lee's firm stance on the Taiwanese identity, which had soared in presidential elections. LKY's 'Asian values' in domestic politics and Lee's idea of democratization further aggravated their ideological clashes.

Perceived as a breakthrough for the Three Links of cross-strait exchanges, the proposed [China-Singapore-Taiwan shipping line](#) was expected to operate in the Taiwan Strait. According to LKY, Lee's initiative was 'a non-starter' because his pro-independence statements angered Chinese leaders ([Lee, 2012](#)). Nevertheless, Lee contended that the

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itself as part of China' (Tzou, 2001, pp. 358–361). In addition to the incidence of the shipping initiative, Lee Hsien Loong's responses to China and pro-independent president Chen Shui-bian of Taiwan serve as an important case. Before assuming the Singapore PM position, Lee Hsien Loong's plan to visit Taiwan incurred Beijing's fierce opposition in 2004. Beijing demanded that he cancel the trip and threatened that the 'historical error' would damage bilateral relations, including FTA negotiations (Jayakumar, 2011).

One cannot ignore that the one-China policy has been a dynamic notion subject to different interpretations. The worsening cross-strait relations drove China's diametrical change in the attitude toward Singapore-Taiwan high-level meetings. In Beijing's view, after Chen's reelection to Taiwan's presidency by a small margin, Lee Hsien Loong's visit could affirm Chen's legitimacy and push Taiwan's identity politics further toward independence. Arguably, Beijing also sought to take advantage of Singapore's leadership change to alter LKY's established practice of visiting Taiwan (Jayakumar, 2011). To safeguard its exercise of sovereign rights essential to status recognition, Singapore rebuked China's demand and responded that the private visit was consistent with Singapore's one-China policy, based on the mutual understanding with Beijing since 1990 (Tay, 2004). Cancelling the trip would jeopardize Singapore's understanding of prevailing cross-strait situations and devastate the country's credibility and standing (Tay, 2004; Jayakumar, 2011). Essentially, Singapore's insistence was prompted by China's denial of recognition of Singapore's status as an independent state that possesses sovereign rights to visit foreign nations.

However, to ease Beijing's nationalist disposition, Singapore strengthened its opposition to Taiwan independence. At the UN General Assembly meeting, Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo stated that the Taiwan independence movement was 'most dangerous', as it would incur war with 'China and drag in other countries' (Minister for Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2004). This statement infuriated Taiwan's DPP government. Foreign Minister Chen Tan-sun of Taiwan blasted Yeo's comments, claiming that even 'a country the size of a piece of snot' could criticize Taiwan (BBC News, 2004). The DPP government's downgrade of Singapore's political status inevitably deteriorated Taiwan's relations with Singapore. The degree of mutual political recognition was not 'restored' until Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT took office as president in 2008. These incidents in Taiwan-Singapore relations confirm the contention of IR recognition theories that misrecognition of identity and status lead to interstate conflicts. Hence, maintaining a balanced policy has been Singapore's geopolitical challenge. Singapore has cautiously maintained substantive relations with Taipei, but consistently stressed that Taiwanese

## 5 From the FTA to the Ma-Xi summit

Taiwan and Singapore's struggles for recognition were driven by their quest for recognition of their national identities and sovereign state status in IR and international law. Mutual recognition of their self-esteem led to collective gains ranging from security cooperation and cross-strait meetings to trade agreements. In recent years, a salient development is the conclusion of the 2013 'Agreement between Singapore and the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu on Economic Partnership' (ASTEP) ([World Trade Organization, 2015](#)). Different from the previous administration of Chen Shui-bian, Ma Ying-jeou sought to expand Taiwan's international space in tandem with mending ties with Beijing under the so-called 1992 consensus on 'one China, respective interpretations' ([Mainland Affairs Council, 2015](#)). Ma's conciliatory approach substantially improved Taiwan's relations with China and Singapore, paving the way for concluding the ASTEP. This FTA also marked a rare precedent for comprehensive trade agreements concluded between countries without legal recognition.

Although the DPP defeated the KMT in Taiwan's 2016 presidential election, the ASTEP remains critical to current Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's 'New Southbound Policy', which aims to expand ties with ASEAN countries ([Office of the President Republic of China \(Taiwan\), 2016](#)). The ASTEP is vital from the perspective of trade security because Singapore and Taiwan are among each other's top ten trade partners, and the agreement can be a stepping stone for Taiwan-ASEAN economic relations ([World Trade Organization, 2015](#)). Before the ASTEP, Taiwan and Singapore signed 17 economic instruments, such as the double taxation agreement and the bilateral investment agreement (BIA). Initial agreements from 1975 were concluded with the government agency 'of the Republic of China' (Republic of China (Taiwan) Treaty and Agreement Database). Markedly, Singapore's recognition of Beijing in 1990 merely changed the concluding agencies without altering the official nature of the agreements. Subsequent agreements were signed with governing government units 'in Taipei' or between the Singapore Trade Office in Taipei and the Taipei Representative office in Singapore.

From a constructivist view, concluding an international instrument such as the ASTEP in Taiwan's own capacity buttresses the recognition of its national identity. It was asserted that the signing of the ASTEP by representative offices of both sides implicates the agreement's non-government-to-government nature ([Magcamit and Tan, 2014](#)).



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statehood controversy, Taiwan joined the WTO as a 'separate customs territory', which reflects a political compromise. Taiwan's position is also distinguishable from Hong Kong's WTO membership, which was based on the sponsorship of its 'metropolitan power' (Hsieh, 2005, pp. 1201–1202). Thus, signing the ASTEP with Singapore in the name of a separate customs territory reflects Taiwan's 'struggle for prestige' through pursuing its own identity separate from China.

More fundamentally, the ASTEP reinforces Taiwan's status recognition under Fraser's principle of participatory parity in external affairs. As possessing capacity to conclude treaties is regarded as a key element of features of recognized states, Taiwan has attempted to demonstrate the exercise of sovereign rights by signing trade agreements. Before 2013, Taiwan only signed FTAs with five Central American diplomatic allies (PPT Slides: Taiwan's Policy and Practices on Free Trade Agreement, 2015). The Ma government's breakthrough was to sign FTAs with New Zealand and Singapore, both maintaining diplomatic ties with Beijing (Bower and Freeman, 2002; Magcamit and Tan, 2014; Young, 2014). In fact, Singapore's informal FTA discussions with Taipei took place before New Zealand's, but the FTA failed to be realized due to former president Chen Shui-bian's instance of using the title 'Taiwan' in the pact (Kuomintang Official Website, 2010). Without 'politicizing' the FTA, Ma's decision to negotiate under the WTO framework began the FTA feasibility studies in 2010 and led to the finalization of the ASTEP.

The ASTEP confirms the hypothesis of recognition theorists that mutual recognition brought cooperative gains. Given Singapore's zero-tariff regime, the economic benefits for Taiwan center on service industries and the government procurement market. Compared with the previous BIA that merely allows investment disputes to be settled amicably through negotiations, the ASTEP's detailed investor-state dispute resolution provisions accord additional protection to investors (ASTEP, 2013). The FTA also facilitates the interactions by establishing a joint committee to periodically review the implementation of the agreement (ASTEP, 2013). Moreover, the high standard FTA could facilitate Taiwan's accession to regional mega-FTAs.

The constitutive understanding of interstate relations that IR scholars have endeavored to develop for studying recognition from identity and status perspectives sheds light on the Taiwan–Singapore relationship since the 1960s. After the ASTEP, the most significant event was the fist-ever summit between presidents of China and Taiwan, Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou, in Singapore. Built upon the legacy of LKY's contribution to the 1993 Koo–Wong meeting, Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong's arrangement for

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Meeting Xi had been on Ma's strategic agenda. Ma preferred to hold the meeting in an international occasion, such as the 2015 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Manila ([Yuan Jian, 2015](#)). Although Taiwan and China are both APEC 'economies', Taiwan presidents have been excluded from the APEC Leaders Meeting due to the Beijing factor. As China was concerned about Taiwan's proposal, Singapore emerged as a mutually acceptable venue. Xi was scheduled to visit Singapore to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Sino-Singapore diplomatic relations. The Ma-Xi meeting could therefore be held immediately after Xi's state visit.

The cross-strait summit included respective remarks, followed by a closed session and press conferences. Both leaders addressed each other as 'Mr. Ma' and 'Mr. Xi' without referring to presidential titles and reaffirmed the 1992 consensus ([Ma, 2015](#); [Rajan, 2015](#)). At the closed meeting, Ma further elaborated that Taiwan's one-China policy was based on the ROC Constitution ([Office of the President Republic of China \(Taiwan\), 2015](#)). Outside the public agenda, Lee Hsien Loong met with Ma before he departed for Taiwan. Lee posted a photo with Ma on the Facebook page, stating that he met 'President Ma Ying-jeou over tea' and that he hoped the summit 'will lead to greater stability and prosperity for the region' ([The Sunday Times, 2015](#), p. A9). To ensure its neutrality, Singapore's Foreign Ministry indicated that it was simply 'requested by both sides to help facilitate the meeting' ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2015](#)). Importantly, more than 50 years following its independence, Singapore has built its distinct national identity other than the 'third China'. As a small state, Singapore's unique role in facilitating cross-strait talks has further strengthened recognition of its salient status in Asian politics.

## 6 Conclusion

The article examined the politics of recognition in IR by analyzing the evolution of Taiwan's unique relationship with Singapore as a case study in the Asia-Pacific. It examined why and how two states forged substantial relations absent of diplomatic relations. Relying on the theoretical concept of recognition that IR scholars developed, this article offered oft-neglected political motivations by exploring the extent to which Taiwan and Singapore have grounded their distinctive identities in the interstate relationship associated with their desired status. It contended that beyond security dimensions, the two countries' struggles for recognition of prestige and dignity

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The isolation of Taiwan following the loss of the UN seat and Singapore's vulnerability due to its size provided the backdrop of bilateral cooperation between the leaders of two nations since the 1960s. Substantive bilateral relations have resulted in head of state visits and Beijing–Taipei talks, which collectively reinforce the politically salient military and trade agreements. The development of the Taiwan–Singapore relationship is critical to the diplomacy of ASEAN and China. Moreover, it enriches the IR concept of recognition by evidencing that in the absence of diplomatic relations, mutual recognition of identity and status could decrease interstate conflicts and lead to collective gains in bilateral relations.

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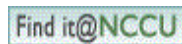
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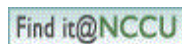
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