

# Strategic talks 'tie relationship together'

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Agreement, those are two very strong pillars of our relationship," said Mrs Clinton. "By adding this formal declaration of a Strategic Partnership Dialogue, we are tying it all together."

She added: "We look to Singapore not only on a bilateral level, but also regionally and globally. And we often are very interested in what Singapore has to say about political issues as well as strategic considerations."

The inaugural round of the talks was held in Washington last month. The

Singapore delegation was headed by Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the US team was led by Dr Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs.

The next session of the strategic dialogue is expected to be held in Singapore next year.

Asked if there were plans to further elevate the status of the talks by including political leaders from both sides, Mr Shanmugam said: "We have regular ongoing discussions between political leaders at the highest levels, and that will obviously continue."

Besides the annual talks, the US and Singapore also signed a memorandum of understanding to embark on joint projects in the Lower Mekong area.

This will see development experts from both countries teaming up to help improve health care, trade capacity, tourism and disaster relief efforts in the area.

Mrs Clinton said the collaborative effort represents "concrete progress in implementing our joint vision", and suggested the US and Singapore also look into helping to improve the public administration and civil service of the countries involved.

However, officials gave no indication

as to when such joint programmes might begin, or where pilot projects might first be launched.

It was not all formal business between the two sides on Wednesday. During his meeting with Mrs Clinton, Mr Shanmugam presented the American diplomat with a sculpture of a red chilli pepper by Singaporean artist Kumari Nahappan.

According to the artist, the sculpture signifies "new life and untapped energies". In return, Mrs Clinton gave Mr Shanmugam a pair of silver cuff links.

While in Washington, Mr Shanmugam will meet other key figures in the US foreign policy establishment, including Senator John Kerry, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He will also meet US Attorney-General Eric Holder in his capacity as Law Minister.

Two other Singapore ministers - Education Minister Heng Swee Keat and Second Minister for Trade and Industry S. Iswaran - will join him in the US capital next week for high-level talks, and to address a major conference held by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

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## US should reconsider Myanmar sanctions: Shanmugam

**WASHINGTON:** Singapore Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam urged the United States to reconsider its long-standing economic sanctions against Myanmar, saying it would encourage the country in its domestic reforms.

But he acknowledged that it was not possible for Singapore to suggest the precise steps or timing for these decades-long sanctions to be unwound, given the complex legislative procedures involved.

"(But) we are able to say, as a friend of both Myanmar and the US, that Myanmar needs to be encouraged down this process," he said.

Mr Shanmugam, who visited Myanmar officially in December, made these comments in an interview with the Associated Press in Washington.

"Its people need to be helped, and I think economic sanctions are not helping the people," he said, according to a transcript of his remarks released to the Singapore media.

The military coup in Myanmar in 1988 and the authorities' subsequent crackdowns on pro-democracy protesters resulted in a long series of retaliatory economic sanctions by Western countries, including the US.

However, the rapid pace of reforms in Myanmar in recent months, including the release of hundreds of political prisoners and a major ceasefire with ethnic insurgents, has sparked talk that the US and Europe should consider lifting the sanctions.

Washington has already taken several dramatic steps recently to show its approval of the political changes, including a historic visit by top US diplomat Hillary Clinton and announcing it would restore full diplomatic ties with Myanmar.

But it remains cautious about any commitment to unwinding the sanctions.

Mr Shanmugam said he and Mrs Clinton had a "substantial" discussion on Myanmar when they met at the State Department on Wednesday, but declined to divulge details of their conversation.

"We have always advocated that the way to deal with Myanmar is to encourage rather than to take a binary approach," he said. "We believe it is time to look at the sanctions and reconsider their utility."

In the wide-ranging interview with AP, the minister also gave Singapore's views on the renewed US engagement in Asia, the ongoing territorial dispute in the South China Sea and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a nascent multilateral free trade agreement that has been generating interest among major trading powers.

Nine member countries, including the US and Singapore, raised eyebrows - and considerable scepticism - late last year when they announced the ambitious goal of completing the groundbreaking trade agreement by July.

Asked if the goal of reaching an agreement this year was on track, Mr Shanmugam said it was still realistic to expect the "broad perimeters" of a deal.

"Beyond that, I think it is a question you have to ask the bigger economies," he said.

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**BROAD AND DEEP TIES**  
"We look to Singapore not only on a bilateral level, but also regionally and globally. And we often are very interested in what Singapore has to say about political issues as well as strategic considerations. So, I think that the US-Singapore relationship is both broad and deep, and it will only continue to strengthen in the years ahead."

Mrs Clinton, on newly formalised strategic talks

### Three pacts to deepen relations

■ **US-Singapore joint vision statement on new political framework**

This document articulates the two countries' shared beliefs, goals and mutual commitment to security, prosperity, diversity and the rule of law.

■ **Memorandum of understanding on United States-Singapore Third Country Training Programme**

This aims to bring together development experts from both countries to jointly assist in improving the standards of health care, trade, tourism and public services in countries in the Lower Mekong region.

■ **Memorandum of understanding on institutionalised strategic dialogue**

This formalises strategic talks between the US and Singapore in an annual, "one-plus-one" format.



Mrs Clinton with Mr Shanmugam at the State Department in Washington on Wednesday. She is holding a red chilli pepper sculpture, a gift from the Singapore minister. Behind them is a portrait of former US secretary of state Cyrus Vance. PHOTO: MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS