

Interview: Benjamin Dubertret - Ambassador of France to Singapore



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The French ambassador to Singapore showcases the importance of the Asian country to France as a regional hub, the footprint of the French business community in the Singaporean economy, and Singapore's aim to tailor its R&D efforts.

In terms of foreign relations, how strategically important is Singapore to France?

Singapore is historically relevant to France; France was the first country to recognize Singapore as an independent nation in 1965. The ties between the two countries have gained in importance over the last 50 years, with the number of French citizens living in Singapore tripling over the last 12 years. As a result, we currently have around 16,000 French citizens in Singapore, making Singapore the third largest country in terms of French expatriates living in Asia. Most French people living in Singapore are business expatriates, which reflects the kind of relationship that France and Singapore maintain.

It is significant that the Prime Minister of France and his counterpart in Singapore signed a strategic partnership in 2012 that recognized the quality of the two countries' collaboration and strengthened its base in order to enhance the future relationship. Previously, Singapore had only signed one such partnership, with the US, therefore it is also a signal of how strategically important the two countries are for one another. I am proud to confirm that the comprehensive relationship between France and Singapore is quite balanced and, besides being strongly business driven, there

are in particular a lot of scientific and development activities being carried out together. We will now try to take this collaboration to the next level.

What are the main characteristics of the collaboration between France and Singapore in comparison to other international relationships with China and other Asian countries?

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The relationship that France has with Singapore is one of the broadest that our country maintains. From a business perspective, Singapore is the hub for other countries within South East Asia. In this regard, more than 50 percent of French investments in the region are based in Singapore; therefore Singapore is a crucial gateway to the rest of the region despite being a small country. In addition, we run some collaborations with Singapore on going abroad together and developing business in countries within the region.

What factors have allowed Singapore to successfully attract investments over the years?

Singapore has secured the right business environment from a legal and political point of view through highly consistent policies which aim to attract foreign and national business investments. On top of that, Singapore has a healthy environment, especially in terms of fighting against corruption and protecting intellectual property rights – which is very important for the pharmaceutical industry.

Singapore is currently undergoing a process of transformation and, in this respect, needs to attract investments that will develop high value-added business opportunities. Expanding on that point, Singapore has been highly selective in attracting high-end activities in general; reception of investments to develop high-end business opportunities is a cornerstone of that strategy.

What lessons from Singapore can France apply to its own economy?

Several things can be learned from Singapore especially in terms of policies to enhance its business and social environment. The balance between Singaporean policies is what really makes the country unique.

People are often interested in the path of development followed by Singapore to obtain its economic success. However, one of the main underpinnings behind this success is its inclusive policy in terms of social and multicultural acceptance. In my opinion, it is in this area where France and Europe can also learn.

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How much has France helped in the socio-economic development of Singapore?

We have played our role within this development based on our large community in the country and strong partnership agreements. In that sense, French MNCs have made a special contribution and have been able to take advantage of the open economy that Singapore offers. The business community has positively evolved in recent years, moving from 600 French companies and 120 French entrepreneurs in 2012 to 800 and 340 in 2016 respectively.

This drastic evolution has had an important impact on the Singaporean economy in terms of quality and quantity of job creation. In fact, French companies and entrepreneurs employed 40,000 people in Singapore back in 2012, which is already a sizeable impact. In addition, I believe that France has brought sectoral diversity here thanks to French companies' business networks. In this regard, we have nearly all the companies that are listed in the Top 40 biggest companies operating in Singapore and a strong SME network that offers high technological solutions to the economy. Notwithstanding, the SME community is facing financial challenges to expand their operations abroad and, therefore, we are targeting business development actions to drive their internationalization to Singapore.

How strategically important have R&D activities in Singapore been for the French business community?

R&D development has always been an important topic on our agenda, but has gained in importance since 2010 in terms of public and private efforts. In this regard, the national science research agency of France (CNRS), one of the main platforms to develop R&D, relocated its regional headquarters from Vietnam to Singapore two years ago showcasing the importance of Singapore as an R&D hub within the region. CNRS have four international joint venture units focused on reactive areas. Singapore is the third largest country for CNRS in terms of numbers of joint venture labs after the US and Japan.

Science research and technology have been hugely important since we signed the strategic partnership; it is one of the areas where we have put most focus and efforts. The results obtained so far are quite satisfactory and we have a strong footprint of French companies such as Sanofi, Biomerieux, L' Oreal, Ipsen or Servier.

On top of that, there is a specific lab focused on immunology that is run by INSERM, one of the most important research institutions in France, and A-Star (Singapore Immunology Network). It is

directed by a French Doctor, Laurent Rénia. Looking into other areas, there is an important number of equally highly respected French researchers in biomedical sciences such as Prof. Patrick Cozzone, Prof. Jean-Paul Thiery, Dr. Bruno Reversade and Dr. Florent Ginhoux.

What are some of the limitations that the country needs to focus on in order to sustain its leadership within the region?

Singapore, despite being a small country, is dedicating a significant amount of public and private resources to R&D and is putting a lot of efforts into building the right economic environment. Nevertheless the amount remains relatively small in comparison to other countries and therefore they have to be highly selective in choosing which R&D activities to engage in. Singapore is really focused on the economic impact of the R&D efforts and, for this purpose, the government has designed a new Research, Innovation, and Enterprise (RIE) program to develop R&D actions focused on impact maximization.

Could you provide some insight into your background and the steps leading up to your incumbent role as Ambassador of France to Singapore?

I have an atypical profile to be French ambassador in terms of my professional experience. I have an administrative, economic and financial background and have worked in control, audit and advisory tasks at the General Inspectorate of Finance for four years. After that, I moved to China for two years as economic advisor to the French Embassy in Beijing, before coming back to France as a member of the steering committee of “Caisse des depots” where I was in charge of the French Savings Fund. After six years I got the opportunity to come to Singapore because the Minister of Foreign Affairs was looking for a more business oriented profile, rather than a diplomat, for the French Embassy in Singapore. There were two main reasons behind this preference: Singapore is highly business-oriented and the ministry is ever more focused on economic development activities.

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