

Switzerland, Singapore agree to strengthen relations

Sara Grosse

Channel NewsAsia, 8 May 2014

Switzerland and Singapore have agreed to strengthen relations and promote further dialogue through a new joint declaration. It was signed on Thursday during President Tony Tan Keng Yam's official visit to Switzerland.

On the second day of his official visit, President Tan met with his counterpart, President Didier Burkhalter in the Swiss capital Bern.

President Tan was greeted by a welcome ceremony and later witnessed the signing of a joint declaration between Singapore and Switzerland, which recognises both sides' desire to enhance their partnership.

The Declaration of Enhanced Partnership between Switzerland and Singapore was signed by Ambassador Beat Nobs, Assistant State Secretary of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs; and Simon Wong, Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This is specifically in the areas of research and development, education, people-to-people ties and economic co-operation.

On Wednesday afternoon, policy-makers and researchers from Switzerland and Singapore held a seminar on how both countries could learn from each other.

Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at Institute of Policy Studies, said: "Like Singapore, Switzerland has a high number of foreign people... That's because they have to keep their borders open as a basic treaty obligation to the EU."

"There has been a shift in the mood among the public to require the government to implement some kind of cap in the numbers. There is no determination of what that cap should be. The question really is how do you manage the foreign population's relationship with the local population. This is a common challenge we face."

On Wednesday night, President Tan gave the keynote address at the annual St. Gallen symposium, which was themed "The Clash of Generations".

He shared Singapore's policies to stay globally competitive in the face of technological advancements -- this includes programmes which retrain dislocated workers for new jobs, and how Singapore's CPF system ensures that the retirement needs of the older population are not met from future working generations.

President Tan said: "Singapore has evolved its policies over the last 50 years based on a strong social compact that allowed trade-offs to be made between different stakeholder groups for the country to progress, and this would continue to be critical to Singapore's ability to ensure that growth continues to be inclusive and beneficial to our current and future generations."

Peter Voser, chairman of the St Gallen Symposium, said: "Switzerland can learn a lot on how actually to bridge from the young to the old, and from the old to the young, and also take the burden away from families -- for example, those who have to look after elderly people, increasing health costs, and what the government can do in these areas."

Besides learning from each other, Switzerland is also an important economic partner for Singapore, especially as an investor. The country is now Singapore's 7th largest foreign investor and 23rd largest trading partner. Total trade between the two countries stood at S\$7.3 billion last year.