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Goh Chok Tong [Singapore, Prime Minister]

Chok Tong Goh

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Interviewee: **ESM GOH CHOK TONG**

Interviewer: Donna Cheng

Date: 5 May 2017

Location: Singapore

0:00:20

[Donna Cheng](#)

ESM Goh, thank you for taking time to be with us and to speak on Digital Narratives of Asia. You once aspired to be a journalist, and you also called yourself a reluctant prime minister, yet you took this path and you went on to do really well, fourteen years in this political hot seat. Let us begin with some insights on you, as a person. Why did you say you were a reluctant prime minister?

0:00:48

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

When I graduated, I wanted to pursue my Master's and then do a Ph.D. and hopefully end up as a lecturer and eventually a professor. In other words I wanted to be an academic, but I was bonded to serve the Government and the Government called me to serve in the administrative service. Then later on I joined Neptune Orient Lines, serving out some years of my bond there. Never thought of becoming a politician. I never dreamt that I'll be an MP (Member of Parliament). When I was asked to serve first as an MP, I agreed. Later on when I was asked to become the leader of the younger ministers, I had no choice but to agree. So, reluctance as in a sense that I was not prepared, when I graduated or as a young man, to enter politics. But once I said yes, of course, you can't be reluctant. I was not fighting for the post of prime minister, it was given to me but I felt that I should be responsible and decided to do it.

0:00:20

[Donna Cheng](#)

So you said yes, right? What went through your mind at each point when you had to say yes?

0:02:05

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

When I was invited by Hon Sui Sen to consider standing for elections, I asked for three days to think over. It's primarily to see whether I could adjust. I never prepared myself become, as I said, a politician, so not good in linguistic skills, and hardly any Chinese, and no Malay, and never did any public speaking. So, you got to think whether you can do the job. Intellectually, there was no problem but it's whether you could do the job politically, that's number one. And I had a bursary in university. But for the bursary, I would not be able to go to university and therefore finish my education there. So, there was a certain sense of obligation and service.

0:02:58

[Donna Cheng](#)

Giving back.

0: 02:59

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Of giving back to the Government, yes, and to the country.

0:03:04

[Donna Cheng](#)

And even at the start when you talked, when you were considering the prime minister, you didn't have the easiest of start. For example, Mr Lee Kuan Yew has huge shoes to fill for you to step up to that. He himself had said you're not the first choice, and there were people who said you were a seat warmer. That was tremendous pressure that you faced. How did you overcome that?

0: 03:29

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I think that's a personal philosophy. When you're asked to do a job, and you're set to do it, you just focus on what you should do. So I was never bothered by all the snide remarks. I used to laugh, "Yes, I'm a seat warmer, question is how long you warm the seat?" Of course, I never expected I'd be warming it for fourteen years.

0:03:47

[Donna Cheng](#)

That wasn't warming the seat.

0: 03:49

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I thought several years, one, two terms, and then pass on to the next person who could do a better job. So, I ignored all that. Therefore the stress was not great. Just laugh at it.

0:04:01

[Donna Cheng](#)

Who gave you the strength?

0:04:03

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I would say, in a sense, it's myself because I learnt to be adaptable. Like, I wanted to do my Master's, not allowed to do so. I never cried. I was under bond, just shrugged my shoulder and life moved on. Then I was working in Neptune Orient Lines. I was a chief executive, then they asked me to enter politics, a new field. I said yes, and I adjusted. So, when I was asked to lead the team and lead the country as prime minister, I can tell you, some of my colleagues were quite reluctant to even be considered because the shoes were so big.

You step into the pair of shoes, you could hardly walk in them. So, I decided to be comfortable in my own skin. Or, as I put it then, I'm going to wear my own pair of shoes. His was too large for me. No, I wear my own pair of shoes, and hopefully I'll grow my pair of shoes for others. So it's a philosophy that I had.

0:05:04

[Donna Cheng](#)

So you're very pragmatic, you're adaptable. Did you work on your own, or was there a mentor for you, or somewhat close circle...?

0:05:13

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

No, this kind of philosophy... it's probably in you. Now, I wanted to be a journalist, and I wanted to read English in university. But I guess there's a streak of pragmatism in me, I decided to do economics. So that's how I ended up, because there was a streak, and I think there's still the streak in me - get things done, be practical and adapt. What you cannot control, not point sobbing about that. Just move on.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

How was Senior Minister then at that time, Mr Lee? How was he as a mentor to you, because he was the only other prime minister we had?

0:05:49

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I think first, we had a very good relationship. Very candid with one another, very frank. So, he told me quite frankly that he preferred Dr Tony Tan to be the prime minister and he gave his reasons and why I was the second choice. So, we just accepted it. I was quite happy if Dr Tan wanted to be the prime minister, and I said so, I would support him. I was not in this, and neither was Tony Tan in this, or Ong Teng Cheong and my other colleagues, for the power of being prime minister. It's just to serve the country and we understood why. So, what Mr Lee did was, to impress upon me and my colleagues that somebody has got to step forward to run the country. He'll put it this way to us, sometimes to me, one to one - what happened if a bus were to run over me. So of course, we thought that's not possible. He had

his security, his backup cars. Then he changed, what happened if the plane I was in crashed. That's quite possible, one in a million. What he was trying to tell us is, somebody has to run the country, and he's looking for that somebody, looking for a team. So, mentoring started from there. Injecting a sense of obligation to serve, in many of us.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

So that drove you? That...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

That drove, not just me. I think my group of younger ministers.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

What were the most challenging times for you, fourteen years as prime minister?

0:07:31

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

There were many crises. The Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, and then the September 11, 2001. The attack on the Twin Towers. The Jemaah Islamiyah plot against Singapore and other countries in the region. Then lastly, we had the SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003. These were different crises, but each crisis would shape the thinking differently. First, the financial crisis. That's economic in nature.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

That's your background as well.

0:08:10

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

The tigers... the tiger economies became overnight, whimpering kittens. So, we lost our reputation as tiger economies and the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) shrank. We had to cope with potential job loss, anxiety, uncertainty where the economy will grow. So, the economic side was very important for the team and for me, to show leadership. Not just that, we also had to show leadership within the region. Singapore was less affected than other countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand. We had to show some leadership in getting the leaders over here to look at the problem as a region, as a group in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Then the Jemaah Islamiyah plot and the terrorism threat, the danger for us was not so much security, although that was very important. It's more what

the impact would be on our society. If a bomb had gone off, perpetrated by a group of Muslim terrorists, there'd be confusion. There'd be division within the country. Were all Muslims like that? Those would be the questions asked. So, the priority was to assure Singaporeans that we were a multi-racial society, multi-religious community and that is what Singapore was and should be. So that was the greater concern, whether something happen, the impact might reverberate throughout the whole community. Then third one is SARS. SARS was a very physical thing. It's a life and death for many of us. So that was a frightening episode you see.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Yes. For yourself as prime minister at that time, did you have a mentor? Did you...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

The mentor would be Lee Kuan Yew. From the very beginning, as a political mentor and throughout my career, he was always there as a member of the cabinet. Not just to me, but to many of the cabinet ministers. He would not interfere with our decision. He would not tell us what to do. He gave us a lot of space. But from where he was, if he could see that certain ideas to be improved, he would then offer his views to us. Communication was very important. He would sometimes tell us maybe put it this way, then it's better understood by the people. So he's mentor to the whole group. So of course my mentor in that sense too.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

So he was your go-to in some ways? Were you like, pick up the phone and call... because as we spoke to different leaders in the region, they talked about...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

No, I don't normally go to him. I was the Prime Minister, he would come to me. We were, it's...

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Yes, so there are... are there, I'm not... not in that sense. But were there others that you would consult?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

No, I meant in the literal sense but also... no, because protocol is very important. I respected him as a senior, as a mentor, as a teacher. I did tell him, maybe I'll go to your room to discuss certain things. Often, we would do it on the telephone, but certain things we discussed face to face. He'll say, "No, you are the Prime Minister, I'll come to your room." I said, "No problem, Mr Lee." Of course I called him Senior Minister at that time. I said, "No problem." But he made a point that I was the Prime Minister, he must show respect to me. Had he not shown respect to me, others watching, civil servants, the security officers, they will say, "Well, if Mr Lee did not show respect to the Prime Minister, we can follow him. We don't have to show too much respect." So, you learn something from there, that whilst personally, protocol was not important, but to the public, certain form must be observed. So, that's teaching you in a way, without telling me that he was teaching me. Observe certain protocol even though privately you could be very, very comfortable with one another.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Was it a lonely journey as prime minister?

0:12:35

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

No, my colleagues were okay, I was sociable so... I was quite open, consultative. So, not much of a problem.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

You were also huge on consultative approach. What made you take that stance?

0:12:51

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Again, I think it's the time. Time has changed and also personality. First, personality. I was not Lee Kuan Yew. I decided I could not govern Singapore as a Lee Kuan Yew. People will laugh at me because you... did not have his personality. You wanted to be feared, but people might not fear you, because that's not your character or... it... I did not even have a thuggish look like Mr Lee had. [Both laugh] So, you just decide, don't try to follow him, be yourself. Be yourself, that's number one. My style, normally would be more to engage people. To consult in the sense I gave people a sense that they're participating in the decision-making. Not just with my ministers, but also with Singaporeans. It's your country, let's engage one another. That's one. And two - different period. By my time, when I took over, Singapore was a middle income country. We were still, emphasizing economic growth, trying to improve people's lives, but not struggling to survive. Mr Lee's time, we were struggling to survive, no room for mistakes, as he put it. No nonsense. He had been elected to be the prime

minister, he decided. In my case, different time, I said no. Engage the middle class, engage Singaporeans. So, more consultative.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Did people take well to it, you feel?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Most people did. But the older people... I knew, the older perhaps Members of Parliament, Mr Lee's generation, and even Mr Lee himself said, "What is this consulting, consulting? Take a decision. Decide. Move on." [Both laugh]

0:14:50

[Donna Cheng](#)

And how did you do that?

0:14:52

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

You just listened, but be myself. So, that's advice from him, but you got to be yourself. And myself, as I said, I was not Lee Kuan Yew, so I governed in my own way.

0:15:05

[Donna Cheng](#)

And yourself, you did well, fourteen years. So...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I decided that the way to govern for myself is to become... in the image of Singaporeans, a trustee for Singapore. That means, please respect me, please trust me, I'm sincere, I look after you, I'm a trustee. I'm not like Mr Lee. So, that was the image I was putting on. This idea also came from Mr Lee. After a while, he understood me that I refused to govern like him.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

So that was a mental model that you had with you, yes? All the time, to be a trustee, you're a...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Yes, he put the idea because he realised that I refused to govern like him, and I could not govern like him. He said, "Well, in that case, build up an image of being a trustee of Singaporeans." So I mean that suited me.

0:15:56

[Donna Cheng](#)

Yes, that suited you. You led the PAP (People's Action Party) through three GEs (General Elections). The first one, the results were less than stellar. What went through your mind that night? Do you remember?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

That night I was sorely disappointed. I showed it in my face, and I said it. That's exactly what happened. Because when I took over from Mr Lee, there was actually a sense of relief in many people that finally transition had taken place. People recognised that Mr Lee had done a very good job, but he was also a toughie. A lot of, shall we say, unpopular policies, Mr Lee wanted to push through: graduate mother policy, and a few others. CPF (Central Provident Fund) - deferring the withdrawal age. So, people welcomed my taking over. Therefore I expected bigger support. It did not come, so I felt maybe... and I put it, maybe the style was not quite what they like. So, I have to change certain things. So it's just a night of disappointment for me.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

How did you recover from that?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

After a while I said, "What you could not control, let's not spend too much time on that." Then you started to analyse what happened. Was it because I was not doing a good job, or was it because the mood was that way? I was consoled by many people. They said, "Had you not led the election, the results will be worse under Mr Lee?" [Both laugh] That's academic. We analysed the reasons why, made certain changes and then of course, make sure you got a good programme to win people over, their hearts and their minds for the next election.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

In the next two elections, Singapore gave you really strong mandate, right? How much, do you think, was the result of your consultative style of leadership, of winning over people's hearts, having people understand your policies, giving you feedback?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

That's only one aspect. It should not be over emphasised that because your style was different, you're more likable, people supported you. The key factor was the results in the economy. Were people's lives getting better? That's not purely due to the government, that government played a very important part, the external circumstances also helped. So, at that time, there was a more benign... the external environment, there was growth and the economy grew by seven, eight percent. Nine, ten percent and so on, in some years. So, people felt that their lives were getting better. That's the key. Of course, we played a very big part, but the circumstances outside helped us a lot.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Let's take the discussion a little bit beyond Singapore per se. We talked about what happened internally. During your time as PM, Indonesia for example, went through four presidents, right? What was the situation like for you when you know there were leadership changes in the region? How do you establish yourself, and re-establish yourself with the leaders?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

First, there's Suharto. We had known him for many years. I was privileged that I met him when Mr Lee was the Prime Minister, so he got to know me, maybe casually as the Deputy Prime Minister. Later on as the Prime Minister, I worked very well with him. A man of honour, focused on developing Indonesia, and on establishing good relations with the neighbours. Singapore, Indonesia, enjoyed very good relations. So, that night when the riots took place in Jakarta, I watched what happened and looked at him being pilloried, I just felt very sad for him, because we knew that the consequence could be chaotic situation for Indonesia. So, he left. Then the question was - how do we get on with the leaders? Habibie, I knew him too. He was the Minister for Science and Technology. So we got to know him very well. So, when he took over, it was not an issue of somebody new to us. I met him many times, so we just worked with him. The key is, in Singapore, we cannot choose leaders outside Singapore. You have to learn to work with the leaders outside, whoever they are. That's the key diplomatic skill that Singapore must have. So, Habibie, we worked with him. Some instances, we had some problems, "Little Red Dot". Well, we just accepted it, that's Habibie, but tried to work with him. In other words, focus on the essentials of relations between both countries. What's the nub of the issue between both countries? How do we get on? How do we help them to do better? And how can they help us to do better? So that's the way to get on with the leaders outside.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

In the broader ASEAN arena, Singapore also fared really well under your leadership. You were the mastermind, the Asia-Europe Meeting, ASEM, was your brainchild. What was the thinking behind that?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

At that time, China was emerging as a very important economy and country. So the thinking was - how do we get China to be closer to the Europeans, and also ASEAN? ASEAN, after the financial crisis, suffered quite a fair bit in reputation. So I wanted to have a link of ASEAN, China, to Europe. So, I put it this way, there were three big economic blocks in the world - US (United States) by itself, US-Canada and so on, then Europe, then Asia. US and Europe, they had their Atlantic relationships, very strong. NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and many other political relationships. Then America-Asia, we had APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). So there was a link. But there was no link between Europe and Asia. Even Japan with Europe, not such strong links, as a country with Europe. So, that was a missing link. It came as a flash. I said, "Ah, that's a missing link. How do I put it across with the Europeans?" I was going to France for my official visit, so I refined the idea, put it to the French, I said, "That's a missing link. I'll play my part in Asia, would you play your part in Europe? You gather your friends, I gather my friends. We have this meeting called ASEM." The attraction for the Europeans, to be very frank, was not ASEAN, it was China.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

So it was...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

For a certain point of time, China was still not out internationally as an active member. Access to the Chinese leaders was very difficult. So they all felt this meeting is good idea. China will be there.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

So it was like a gateway, right? Southeast Asia... created... yes... was like a bridge to China. That was the attraction for the...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Like we're creating a bridge. Yes. That's the attraction for them, but my goal was ASEAN. If you can get the...

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Yes... was at least to get some mandate.

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

...European to pay more attention to ASEAN. We can also improve the standings and the relevance of ASEAN to Europe.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

ASEAN at that time had its challenges and over the years it's changed. Tell us more about... how you see ASEAN has evolved, and the challenges it's faced since your time?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Since my time it has evolved into a more recognisable unit. The key there was the ASEAN Economic Community, plus the ASEAN Forum, Regional Forum. So they gave ASEAN better entities. The Regional Forum was quite clear, that's discussing foreign affairs, security issues and so on, but it was done by ASEAN. In other words, ASEAN became relevant to the others, and ASEAN was central in this, in organising the Regional Forum. The economic community gave the leaders here a sense of purpose, that there was an end goal for ASEAN. Before that we gathered, we talked and talked, many progress, many measures. Yes, they were implemented, but what's the end goal? The end goal should be a tighter economic community. From there they moved on to a tighter political-socio community, security community. So it has evolved into a tighter community in that sense. Cohesive? I think room for more cohesion.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

What's the challenge there?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

The challenge is actually our own domestic politics. If each country could do better in terms of economic development, in terms of political stability, then there'll be more room for us to

look outside our own country to establish a bigger ASEAN. But, far too many of us are bogged down, in tackling our own domestic politics and economic challenges.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

ASEAN turns fifty this year, or is fifty this year. What is a key challenge you see for ASEAN moving forward?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

The key challenge would be to maintain its relevance to people outside. ASEAN to us may be important, but if the Europeans, the Americans don't regard ASEAN as an effective regional entity, then ASEAN's relevance will decrease. To be relevant, ASEAN must be seen to be upholding certain values, core values. Now one would be to maintain the present international order based on rule of law, based on free trade. That's important. More inclusive of all countries in the world, trade could flow. That's a core value for us, the openness of the international system based on rules, and so on. That's important. Secondly, ASEAN must be able to also think what role it can play as a central entity. The Regional Forum, ASEAN Regional Forum, is a good example. The other countries will find it difficult to get together and meet, but we could do so as ASEAN, because we're neutral. Ten countries, neutral, we could play that central role. These are two important core values that ASEAN can show to the rest of the world.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

What would you say to current and future leaders, if there's one thing they could do, as a leader, to ensure the success of ASEAN, what would that be?

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I think spend more time with one another, and think on how we can prosper our neighbours, which therefore will prosper ourselves, and make ASEAN more cohesive, and more effective as a regional organization.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Some leaders we have spoken to have talked about that. In the past, the leaders can call on to each other easily and chat, and there was a lot more time and space to develop that kind of relationship. But given the pace of the way the world is today, there's lesser time for these relationships to develop. You think that's true?

0:27:56

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I don't know about time, but I could make this observation. During my time, there was more personal engagement. I could for example play golf with President Ramos. He would ask me, "Let's go and play golf," and I went to the Philippines. He came here, we'll play golf. Prime Minister Thaksin, the same thing. And Prime Minister Hun Sen, who did not play golf, I told him, "Golf, very necessary, to get on with other leaders." He took up golf and we started playing golf. So there was more that personal engagements during my time. I don't know whether it's myself and the others, but I think the others also, they engaged with one another. Dr. Mahathir had also good personal relations with the others. With some other leaders, not with all the leaders, that's not possible, but at least with most of the leaders. Today I find that maybe the demands of the world, and the pressure of domestic politics, are such that the leaders have less time for one another in a personal sense. But mind you, they do meet. They have their retreats. Prime Minister Lee and Najib had their retreats. Then PM Lee also with the Thais. Not so much retreat but regular meetings, then with President Jokowi too, they had their retreats. But that's not taking place between the other leaders say, Philippines, Indonesia, I don't see that.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

So these are things that you'd...

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[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

These are the things, the personal element... today, in my view, is absent.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

In bringing this to a close, I'd like to turn the attention back to you. If you had to name just one, what would you say was a key event in your time that kind of defined you as a leader?

0:29:51

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Outside Singapore, I would say the emergence of China would be a key geopolitical event. It's a fact that China has become stronger. China becoming stronger, will become more muscular in its actions against its neighbours. But China offered, still offers, many opportunities. But China also becomes a competitor, a competitive threat. Not a strategic threat but competitive. So whatever we can do, China can do. China believes they can do it better. So, that's the challenge. China thinks it can do better than us in many areas. Can we do better than China in some areas, which gives Singapore the advantage and allows us to make a living

for Singapore, to sustain our high standard of living? So that's a key challenge, which would define say me as a leader. How do you position Singapore against the rise of China as a competitor, and using opportunities in China, and having good relations with China?

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[Donna Cheng](#)

What continues to drive you today? Because you have not slowed down, you continue to go out there and build relations for Singapore.

0:31:16

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

I had spent so many years, it'd be a total waste if I had just retired and then said, "Look, you chaps take over the job, I have done enough." What do I do? Cut grass, or gardening, or rear birds, and so on, or play golf? I mean some people retire, they do it, but your brain would go down the drain very quickly. Occasionally, the Government, especially MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), would ask me could I do certain things, could I meet certain people. I said, "Yes, by all means." I know them, they wanted to see me. I'm happy to see them. So, that's one area where I still could contribute to Singapore.

0:31:58

[Donna Cheng](#)

What keeps you happy every day?

0:32:00

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Keeps me happy every day... I open my eyes, I got something to do. Something useful.

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[Donna Cheng](#)

Alright. Thank you so much for your time.

0:32:07

[ESM Goh Chok Tong](#)

Yes, thank you. Thank you.

0:32:08

[Donna Cheng](#)

Thank you for spending this morning with us.

0:32:10

ESM Goh Chok Tong

Okay, thank you.