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Singapore in 2020: The “Crisis of a Generation” – Challenges, Change and Consequences

Eugene Tan K. B.

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A “COVID-ed” Year

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong described the COVID-19 global pandemic as the “crisis of a generation” for Singapore and Singaporeans. The year 2020 was a trying one, with the full ramifications of the crisis indeterminate for politics, economy and society. The imperative to keep Singaporeans safe and to mitigate the severe economic downturn preoccupied the government for much of the year. It saw the government put forth four budgets totalling S\$93 billion specifically as countermeasures to the pandemic within a span of a hundred days. With the public health situation under control by the end of the third quarter of 2020, the focus shifted towards “emerging stronger” in the post-pandemic world. Singaporeans also went to the polls in July 2020 where the ruling People’s Action Party won a clear mandate, but, arguably, turned in its worst electoral showing since independence. The uncertainty as to who will become the fourth premier resurfaced. Foreign relations remained on an even keel even as the pressing priorities globally were on domestic concerns. Singapore sought to keep supply lines open and ensure food security in a world that became drenched with fear, panic and trepidation. It is an understatement that COVID-19 demonstrated the city-state’s continuing vulnerabilities, even though it is in a far stronger position at the end of 2020 to deal with the challenges.

Holding Pattern Adrift¹

Changi Airport, Singapore’s icon of open borders, efficiency and a connected world, was eerily quiet for much of 2020. Air travel plunged dramatically as the pandemic made its visceral presence felt. The imperative and urgency of maintaining Singapore’s air hub status took on greater poignancy even as the pandemic reared its ugly head since it “anchors Singapore’s place in the world ... an attractive node for international business, trade, investment, and tourism” despite it not being, geographically, a natural air hub.² COVID-19 “decimated air travel and set us back decades”.³

By end August 2020, Changi Airport had lost about half of its air links and over 95 per cent of scheduled passenger services. With that, the aviation and tourism sectors were badly hit. Terminals 2 and 4 were closed.⁴ As part of the overall economic recovery plan, newly appointed transport minister Ong Ye Kung reiterated the government’s assurance that Singapore was determined to revive the Changi air hub in a safe way. The authorities embarked on improving the aviation infrastructure; namely, developing a three-runway system at Changi airport. But it also decided to “pause” the construction of Changi Airport’s Terminal 5 for at least two years, given the “great uncertainties” about the future of the aviation and travel industry.⁵

The Virus Arrives

With the knowledge of an unknown medical ailment in China’s Wuhan province, the government sprang into action with the establishment of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF) on 22 January 2020. Co-chaired by Health Minister Gan Kim Yong and then National Development Minister Lawrence Wong, the MTF was responsible for Singapore’s overall response to the coronavirus. The following day, Singapore’s first case, a 66-year-old man visiting from Wuhan, was confirmed to be infected with COVID-19. On 4 February 2020 the first case of infection in the community was detected: a 28-year-old Singaporean who worked at Yong Thai Hang, a Chinese health products shop in the Lavender area popular with Chinese tourists.

On 7 February the Health Ministry raised the “Disease Outbreak Response System Condition” (DORSCON) level from yellow to orange,⁶ prompting a wave of panic buying as Singaporeans became increasingly anxious. The first deaths from COVID-19 took place on 21 March 2020. From 24 March, short-term visitors were not allowed to enter or transit through Singapore. All bars, cinemas and entertainment outlets were closed from 26 March. On 7 April, circuit-breaker measures were implemented.⁷ Mask wearing became mandatory outside of one’s residence from 14 April.⁸ It was a troubling time, given that much was unknown of the novel coronavirus.

Battening Down to Fight the Virus: WFH and HBL as the New Norm

On 3 April, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in a live broadcast across all media platforms, announced that a one-month circuit breaker would commence on 7 April.⁹ The rising number of cases in the last two weeks of March—which numbered more than fifty new cases daily, and with many of them local ones—necessitated such a drastic measure. Despite contact-tracing efforts, for about half of these cases the authorities did not know where or from whom an infected person had caught the virus.¹⁰ Of particular concern was the discovery a few days earlier of several clusters at foreign worker dormitories, and one at a nursing home.¹¹ Ultimately, the goal of the circuit breaker was to gradually bring down the number of new infections through limiting a person’s physical interaction to as few people as possible by staying at home as much as possible.

Most workplaces, except for essential services and key economic sectors, were closed, and work from home (WFH) became a new phenomenon.¹² Essential services such as food establishments, markets and supermarkets, clinics, hospitals, utilities, transport and key banking services remained open, but with safe-distancing measures in place. Dining-in at eateries became prohibited. Educational institutions moved to full home-based learning (HBL). All preschools and student-care centres were closed.¹³ Restrictions on movements and gatherings of people were imposed. Socializing with others beyond one’s own household was prohibited. Singaporeans were also urged to avoid visiting even extended family members who were not staying with them, especially if they were elderly or vulnerable. Safe-Distancing Ambassadors were deployed to encourage people not to crowd together and to observe safe distancing.

PM Lee also assured Singaporeans that there were sufficient food supplies to last through the circuit-breaker period and beyond. As the circuit-breaker measures affected workers and businesses severely, the government unveiled its third budget, which provided additional support for households and businesses, over and above what was provided in the two earlier budgets.¹⁴

On 21 April 2020, two weeks into the circuit breaker, PM Lee, in another live broadcast to the nation, announced tighter measures and a four-week extension of the circuit breaker to 1 June 2020.¹⁵ The battle against COVID-19 by then had shifted to the purpose-built foreign-worker dormitories, where infections had grown rapidly, ranging from a few hundred cases to more than a thousand a day.¹⁶ PM Lee acknowledged that businesses and workers were “hurting greatly”. To mitigate the harsh effects, the government continued to help businesses and workers cope during the extended circuit-breaker period by providing financial support through supplementary budgets. PM Lee also assured the migrant workers that “we will care for you, just like we care for Singaporeans. We thank you for your cooperation during this difficult period.”

In the wider community the circuit breaker was starting to have a positive effect, with the number of community cases declining slowly but surely. But there was still the imperative to bring down daily infections more sharply to a single digit and even zero. Another concern was to reduce the number of unlinked cases.¹⁷ There was also the imperative to ensure that if any leakage occurred from the dorms to the wider community, the authorities could detect and contain it early, and prevent new clusters from forming and bursting out of control. Consequently, more workplaces were closed, leaving “only the most essential services” open to minimize the risks of transmission among these workers.¹⁸ The constant concern with the health services being overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases was not helped by the record number of dengue cases in 2020, some of which required hospitalization.¹⁹

Eye of the COVID Storm – Migrant Worker Dormitories²⁰

The initial top priority in April and May 2020, understandably, had to be on containing the virulent outbreaks in the foreign worker dormitories, which accommodated about 300,000 migrant workers. All dormitories were placed under isolation by mid-April. Testing was stepped up, with prioritized testing for migrant workers in essential services so they could be cleared to continue working safely during the circuit-breaker period. Medical support was set up at the dormitories by the end of April. Between June and August 2020, the focus shifted to clearing the dormitories of COVID-19 so that as many migrant workers as possible could resume work safely. Testing remained key and the “extraordinary decision” was taken to systematically test all migrant workers living in dormitories, symptomatic or otherwise. By August, all migrant workers had been tested at least once for COVID-19. By early November, more than 98 per cent of migrant workers living in dormitories were cleared to resume work.

As at 13 December 2020, 54,505 out of the 58,320 persons who tested positive for COVID-19 in Singapore via a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test were migrant workers living in dormitories.²¹ This works out to 93.5 per cent of COVID-19 cases in Singapore being migrant workers. In addition, 98,289 migrant workers had positive serology test results.²² The prevalence rate worked out to 47 per cent of 323,000 dormitory dwellers. Fortunately, the vast majority of the migrant workers infected had only mild symptoms and did not require acute care in the hospitals.²³

Given that COVID-19 is highly infectious and the imperative to avoid another circuit breaker, the testing regime remained stringent, with rostered routine testing (RRT) for workers living in dormitories and for those who work in the construction, marine or process sectors every fourteen days.²⁴ This enables timely detection and rapid containment of any new cases or clusters. “Safe Living” and “Safe Working” measures at all dormitories and worksites have been instituted alongside progressive easing of restrictions on migrant workers.

The government also quickly put in place plans to build new dormitories with improved safety standards to minimize the risk of a resurgence of COVID-19 among migrant workers and to prevent new public health threats. As crowded dormitories accelerated the spread of COVID-19, some workers were urgently moved to temporary housing in sites such as army camps and sports halls, as well as vacant HDB blocks and private apartments slated for redevelopment. By end 2020, additional space to house around 60,000 workers had been created through new quick-build dormitories (QBDs), retrofitting unused state properties and building additional construction temporary quarters (CTQs).²⁵ Longer-term plans include new purpose-built dormitories (PBDs) to house up to 100,000 workers, which will replace the temporary accommodations built this year.²⁶ This new building programme will take several years to complete, with the aim of having eleven new PBDs ready by 2022.²⁷

Light at the End of the Tunnel?

On 1 June the circuit breaker was lifted and Singapore entered Phase One of the reopening. Schools reopened from 2 June with students preparing for major national examinations attending school daily. Parents and grandparents could receive up to two visitors at once, from the same household. Singapore quickly moved to Phase Two of the reopening on 19 June 2020. Dining-in resumed but with a maximum of five persons per table—safe-distancing requirements permitting—and households could receive up to five visitors at any one time.

Phase Three of the reopening began on 28 December. Capacity limits in public places like malls and attractions and at places of worship were eased.²⁸ Groups of up to eight can dine out together or visit someone’s home. Migrant workers returned to the community in a controlled manner, with strict measures in place. But amid the welcome news, PM Lee also cautioned that “the battle is far from won.... There is a long way to go.” He added that Singapore would “re-open our borders in a controlled and safe manner”.²⁹

PM Lee also revealed that the government had been working quietly behind the scenes since early in the pandemic to secure access to vaccines.³⁰ More than S\$1 billion had been set aside to procure the vaccines. PM Lee also announced that the Health Sciences Authority had approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for pandemic use, and that if all went to plan there would be enough vaccines for everyone in Singapore by the third quarter of 2021. The first batch of vaccines arrived in Singapore on 21 December.

Vaccinations would be free but voluntary for all Singaporeans and long-term residents. PM Lee urged as many Singaporeans to get themselves vaccinated, adding that his Cabinet colleagues and he would be vaccinated early to instil confidence that the vaccines are safe, even for seniors. The nation-wide vaccination exercise commenced on 30 December with forty healthcare workers at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases being vaccinated. Vaccinations of the elderly, starting with those aged seventy years and above, were scheduled to begin in February 2021.

That Singapore progressed relatively quickly from Phase One to Phase Three reopening meant that it could set its sights on the post-COVID period. On 7 December 2020, the government announced that the World Economic Forum (WEF) would host its Special Annual Meeting in Singapore in May 2021.³¹ The meeting will bring together the globe's top leaders in government, business and academia to address some of the more pressing issues facing the world. The WEF said that "Singapore was best placed to hold the meeting", considering the organization's priority of safeguarding the health and safety of participants and the host community.³²

To augment efforts to re-open its borders in a controlled and safe manner, Singapore embarked on a variety of "safe travel" schemes, with the boldest being the segregated travel lane aimed at business travellers on short-term stays. The Connect@Singapore initiative will open from the latter half of January 2021 to a "limited number" of business, official and high-economic-value travellers from all countries who are staying in Singapore for up to fourteen days.³³ Other schemes include air travel bubbles (ATBs),³⁴ reciprocal green-lane arrangements,³⁵ air travel pass (ATP),³⁶ sea cruises to nowhere,³⁷ and permitting transits through Singapore.

The calibrating of increasingly sophisticated measures can be seen as an attempt by Singapore to gain a first-mover advantage by pioneering safe-travel regimes that would also serve as a preview and test bed for plans to host larger events such as the WEF. As the global situation evolved, Singapore has continued to adjust its border measures to manage the risk of importing and transmitting COVID-19 to the community. Re-opening Singapore's borders was not so much a choice as an imperative. As PM Lee noted, "trade and travel are our lifblood. The longer our own borders stay closed to travellers, the greater the risk of us permanently losing out as an international hub, and consequently hurting our livelihoods ... we will see more imported cases and there will be some risk of these imported cases spreading to the community.... This is a calculated risk we have to accept. But the government will take every precaution, and do our best to prevent imported cases from triggering a new outbreak".³⁸

On a lighter note, hawker culture in Singapore was successfully inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Culture of Humanity in December 2020.³⁹ Earlier, at the 2018 National Day Rally, PM Lee said that such an inscription would help safeguard and promote this unique culture for future generations. It would also "let the world know about our local food and multicultural heritage".⁴⁰

Going to the Polls amid the Pandemic

Parliament was dissolved on 23 June 2020, about three weeks after the circuit breaker was lifted and Singapore had begun Phase One of the reopening.⁴¹ The PAP government was criticized by the opposition parties for putting public health at risk.⁴² But no one could tell whether the situation would get better in a few months' time.⁴³ The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee (EBRC) was constituted in August 2019. By the time it submitted its report to the prime minister in March 2020, this was the longest that an EBRC had sat.⁴⁴

PM Lee accepted the EBRC's recommendation for 93 members of Parliament to be elected from 31 electoral divisions comprising 14 single member constituencies (SMCs) and 17 group representation constituencies (GRCs).⁴⁵ Although the average GRC size was reduced to 4.65 MPs, down from 4.75 in the last Parliament, the proportion of GRC seats in the 14th Parliament remains unchanged at about 85 per cent.

Because of safe-distancing measures, Nomination Day on 30 June 2020 was a quiet affair as a result of no supporters being permitted at the nomination centres. Laws were passed earlier to enable candidates who were unwell to file their papers through their proxies. The PAP fielded twenty-seven first-time candidates, and the biggest surprise was the re-deployment of DPM Heng from Tampines GRC to East Coast GRC.⁴⁶ The other anticipated development was Progress Singapore Party (PSP) leader Dr Tan Cheng Bock (a former veteran PAP MP) being fielded in West Coast GRC. Earlier, PM Lee's estranged younger brother, Mr Lee Hsien Yang, was unveiled as a member of the PSP, although he did not offer himself as an election candidate.⁴⁷ The Workers' Party (WP), in a bold move, did not field three of its incumbent MPs, including its charismatic former leader, Mr Low Thia Kiang.⁴⁸ As with the 2015 general election, all seats were contested.

To facilitate effective campaigning, the Elections Department (ELD) made special arrangements and issued guidelines.⁴⁹ Candidates could go on house-to-house campaigning in person while observing the safe-distancing precautions. Physical election rallies were prohibited, but the ELD made arrangements for parties and candidates to speak directly to voters on television and online via live streaming.⁵⁰ The constituency political broadcasts were introduced, enabling every election candidate to go on television and reach out to voters with their plans, particularly to those who may not go online.

Bread-and-butter issues remained key for voters as COVID-19 had amplified in stark ways the concerns, angst and anxiety over jobs, social inequality and uncertainty about the future. COVID-19 became the segue for the parties to discuss other hot-button issues such as immigration, income gaps and social safety nets. The pandemic and the circuit breaker had thrown into sharp relief the unmet needs in society, the class divide and the challenges posed to the social compact. It demonstrated that material concerns often arise from how society was organized; how wealth was made, shared and redistributed; and how society valued different jobs.

The PAP sought to frame the key election issues narrowly, dwelling on voters giving it a strong mandate so it could push through tough measures to tackle the economic emergency unleashed by COVID-19. This was captured in the PAP election campaign slogan, "Our Lives, Our Jobs, Our Future".⁵¹ On the other hand, the opposition was determined to broaden the key election issues arising from the pandemic. For them, everything was on the table: the pandemic response, economic policy, social policy and political development. They saw that the pandemic could have sensitized voters to issues they may have seldom thought about or perhaps felt were absent in Singapore society. The Workers' Party campaign slogan, "Make Your Vote Count", sought to emphasize the agency of each and every voter as a catalyst of change. The WP was effective, in particular, in driving home the point that a "wipeout" of the opposition from Parliament could not be foreclosed. The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was invoked several times over the nine-day campaign period, with immigration and foreign workers capturing the lion's share.⁵²

On Polling Day, voter turnout was strong. The total number of votes (local and overseas) cast was 2,540,359 (inclusive of 45,822 rejected votes),⁵³ accounting for 95.81 per cent of the 2,651,435 registered electors, which was the highest since 1997. Singaporeans knew what was at stake and, despite the pandemic, were determined to cast their ballots. This was an exemplary demonstration that the needs of public health and the requirements of a democracy are not at odds with each other.

More polling stations were organized to reduce crowding.⁵⁴ Safe management measures were practised at the polling stations, including safe distancing, contactless processing of voters, temperature taking, hand sanitising and, initially, the requirement to wear disposable gloves. Voters were also allocated specific time slots to vote, with seniors given priority to vote before others in the morning. These additional

measures contributed to what the ELD described as “a reduction in the efficiency of polling”; in other words, there were long queues to vote.⁵⁵ In an unprecedented move, the Returning Officer subsequently decided to extend voting hours by another two hours to 10 pm to “allow enough time for all voters to cast their votes”.⁵⁶ This move drew strong criticisms from opposition parties.⁵⁷

A Watershed Election?

The PAP won eighty-three out of ninety-three seats, losing a second group representation constituency in the newly created four-member Sengkang GRC to the Workers’ Party, which now has a record ten elected MPs in the 14th Parliament.⁵⁸ In the process, three office-holders failed to be re-elected, including the labour chief Ng Chee Meng, the secretary-general of the umbrella National Trades Union Congress. The PAP’s vote share fell by 8.7 percentage points from 2015, but remained higher than the 60.1 per cent it garnered in 2011. Twenty-eight women were elected, the largest number and proportion in independent Singapore’s history, including the youngest MP, the WP’s Ms Raeesah Khan, at twenty-six years of age.

“It’s not as strong a mandate as I hoped for but it’s a good mandate. The results reflect the pain and uncertainty that Singaporeans feel in this crisis.... This was not a feel-good election but one where people are facing real problems and expect more rough weather to come”, PM Lee said at the traditional post-election-results press conference. Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam opined that “the election result was good for Singapore. Our politics has also changed permanently.” The imperative is to “make this new balance work well for Singapore”.⁵⁹

Despite the “crisis of a generation”, the general election results point to a considered flight from the status quo rather than a flight to safety. COVID-19 had exposed the soft underbelly of Singapore in a way that no other event was able to.⁶⁰ Between now and the next election, how the PAP government responds to voters’ concerns expressed during the hustings will influence the pace of political change in Singapore.⁶¹

Voters sent a nuanced message to all political parties and election candidates. It was a renewed, urgent expression of a vote for change; more so than in the 2011 election. Many GRCs, including those helmed by the PAP’s fourth-generation (4G) ministers, saw the ground shift significantly against them.⁶² In contrast, the Workers’ Party made handsome gains despite fielding a relatively inexperienced slate of twenty-one candidates and dropping three incumbent MPs from their slate. The feared opposition wipeout did not materialize. Instead, the WP secured a strong endorsement and has entrenched its standing as the leading opposition party. In the six head-to-head PAP-WP contests, involving twenty-ones seats, the WP polled more votes than the PAP (279,922 to 274,442). This points to the WP’s enhanced competitiveness against the PAP. In winning a second GRC, the psychological odds against an opposition party winning a GRC have been greatly reduced.

Voters also showed their preference for a more diverse and competitive political landscape, which the WP and the Progress Singapore Party tapped to good effect with their campaign pledges of being a responsible opposition. The WP and PSP were able to appeal to voters that they can play a constructive role. Crucially, they offered voters a viable choice through the quality of their candidates and party platforms.⁶³

The 2020 general election highlighted more starkly and clearly that the perpetual conundrum the PAP has to grapple with is its own instinctive quest for political dominance, if not hegemony, which is increasingly at odds with the electorate’s growing belief that political competition, diversity and contestation are critical ingredients of a robust system of good governance.

Reflecting on GE2020 at the PAP’s Ordinary Party Conference in November, PM Lee, in his capacity as the PAP’s secretary-general, described the election results as falling “short of our expectations, but I was not completely surprised”.⁶⁴ He opined that “the sharp lockdown and the sharp economic downturn” contributed to a public mood that “was not upbeat, it was apprehensive. The anxiety was palpable, and it

cost us votes.” He added that there was also “a broader desire for more alternative voices and a stronger Opposition to check the PAP government ... and [it] has grown over time”. But he argued that the voting behaviour indicated that voters “wanted the PAP to form the government, and to see Singapore through the challenges ahead”, and that those who voted for the opposition “did so fully expecting that the PAP Government would be returned to power, and Singapore would continue to be in good hands”. He described this voting behaviour as driven by the electorate’s belief that “the PAP is the only party that could win and govern Singapore. The outcome is already certain; so no need to make extra sure. It is a strange dilemma that we face. But that is how it is.”

In his post-election press conference on 11 July 2020, PM Lee revealed that he planned to formally recognize the WP’s leader, Mr Pritam Singh, as the “Leader of the Opposition”. He said: “Singaporeans want the PAP to form the government, but they—and especially the younger voters—also want to see more opposition presence in Parliament.”⁶⁵ To this end, the new office institutionalizes the opposition’s role in Singapore’s system of constitutional checks and balances and will go some way to help the opposition better scrutinize government laws and policies.⁶⁶ The government has exhorted the opposition to go beyond merely asking tough questions to crafting their own policies and having them debated in Parliament.⁶⁷

Leadership Succession in Doubt?

Will Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong still hand over the reins of power within the next two years as he had indicated previously, given his latest pledge to see Singapore through the COVID-19 crisis before passing the baton to his successor? He had indicated, as early as 2010, that he would like to step down before he turns seventy in February 2022.⁶⁸

In 2020 it became clear there would be a delay in his passing on the reins of the head of government to his successor amid the COVID-19 crisis. Since July, Mr Lee had indicated on at least five different occasions that even as leadership renewal remains one of his top priorities, he would see the crisis through before stepping down. The latest was at the ruling People’s Action Party Ordinary Conference in November.⁶⁹ The message was unequivocal that the focus of the government must be put squarely on emerging stronger from the crisis. As such, talk on the political succession timeline was not only speculative but an avoidable distraction.⁷⁰

While no one knows how long the COVID-19 crisis will last, an inordinate delay in political succession will raise legitimate concerns over the readiness of the 4G leadership to take over, never mind that they are said to be already in charge of the day-to-day administration. Such a delay in political succession will have a knock-on effect on anointed successor DPM Heng’s tenure as premier. He turned fifty-nine in 2020. Even if there is no “right time” for the 4G leadership to take over, an uncertain or inordinate delay may inflict untold damage to the public trust and confidence in the 4G leaders. With the bulk of the core 4G leadership being in their mid to late fifties by the time they take over, the political transition cannot be dragged on, especially if the crisis persists beyond 2022. A 4G prime minister will almost certainly have 3G ministers on his team. Singapore’s Cabinet since the 1970s has been intergenerational in that it has leaders from more than one generation. In fact, between 1990 and 2011, the Cabinet had ministers from three generations. Over the next few years, the realization of the leadership succession will be closely watched.

Herculean Effort to Stop the Freefall and Kick-Start the Economy

To address the rapidly evolving pandemic and its wide-ranging effects on Singapore’s economy and society, the government found it necessary to roll out three supplementary budgets to the original “Unity” Budget.⁷¹ The suite of support for individuals, households and businesses includes cash pay-outs, temporary financial assistance, employment opportunities and assistance, loans and insurance payment deferrals, rental relief and digital transformation assistance.⁷² The clarion call was to protect jobs and livelihoods.

Unsurprisingly, despite the massive injection of specific pandemic measures amounting to S\$93 billion, Singapore's economy entered its worst recession since independence in 1965. The economy contracted 5.8 per cent in 2020, marking the first annual contraction since 2001 and Singapore's worst recession since independence. While there were green shoots of recovery in the third quarter, on the back of a gradual resumption of business activities domestically and globally, there remains much uncertainty for the years ahead. The economy is projected to grow by between 4 and 6 per cent in 2021, and this will depend largely on how the global economy performs and whether Singapore is able to continue to keep the domestic COVID-19 situation under control.⁷³

Taking a leaf from its successful handling of the recovery in the wake of the global financial crisis a decade earlier, the government for much of the latter half of 2020 trained its sights on ensuring that Singapore emerged stronger by being relevant and resilient in the post-COVID landscape. To this end, it identified six key shifts that, exacerbated by COVID-19, have been reshaping the global economy: (1) a changing global order; (2) a rebalance between "efficiency" and "resilience" in supply chains and production; (3) accelerating digital transformation and innovation; (4) changes in consumer preferences; (5) an increased focus on sustainability (both environmental and social); and (6) accelerating industry consolidation and churn.⁷⁴ The Emerging Stronger Taskforce (EST) noted the key themes that a connected nation and a sustainable nation must underpin Singapore's future economy.⁷⁵ Adopting a public-private collaboration mode, the EST constituted seven Alliances for Action (AfAs) since June 2020.⁷⁶

In a challenging year with almost non-existent tourist arrivals, the integrated resorts of Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa marked their tenth anniversary of operations in Singapore.⁷⁷ The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) announced it would expand the mandate of the Casino Regulatory Authority by reconstituting the statutory board as the Gambling Regulatory Authority by 2021, with the mandate to regulate the entire gambling landscape in Singapore. Gambling-related legislation are being reviewed and will be updated by 2021.⁷⁸

As part of the effort to grow the suite of financial and banking services available in Singapore, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) awarded four banking licences to operate digital banks: Two for digital full banks (DFB) and two for digital wholesale banks (DWB).⁷⁹ The MAS indicated that the new banks, and the incumbent banks, "will raise the industry's bar in delivering quality financial services, particularly for currently underserved businesses and individuals. They will further strengthen Singapore's financial sector for the digital economy of the future."⁸⁰

In April the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) announced that Singtel and the joint-venture consortium formed by StarHub and M1 were the winners of the IMDA's 5G call for proposals. With the allocation of the radio frequency spectrum, these telcos will roll out 5G standalone networks from January 2021 to provide coverage for at least half of Singapore by end-2022, scaling up to nationwide coverage by end 2025. In June the telcos announced they had selected Nokia and Ericsson to build the main 5G networks. The provision of a world-class, secure and resilient 5G infrastructure is seen as the backbone of Singapore's digital economy.⁸¹

A Responsible Member of the International Community

Despite the pandemic, Singapore had an active year on the foreign-relations front. Many ASEAN meetings took place via videoconferencing. This determination to maintain relations on an even keel despite the challenges of engaging counterparts virtually ensured that Singapore remained purposefully plugged into the global grid, even as some countries turned inward.

For instance, Singapore played a key role in the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) initiative.⁸² On 21 September 2020, members of the "Friends of the COVAX Facility" issued a statement of support for the facility, reiterating strong support for vaccine multilateralism and access to COVID-19 vaccines for all.⁸³ Singapore also pledged five million US dollars to the COVAX Advance Market

Commitment (AMC) mechanism, which will support access to COVID-19 vaccines for ninety-two low-income and lower-middle-income countries.⁸⁴

Ending the COVID-19 pandemic requires a bold, collective effort, and Singapore has demonstrated its resolve to be part of it. A good example of this is Singapore seeking to become a COVID-19 vaccine distribution hub for the region. Positioning Singapore as a hub for vaccine transportation could give the battered aviation sector a boost as it seeks to continue its gradual recovery.⁸⁵ In October the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore and Changi Airport Group set up a task force comprising eighteen members to look into improving the process of the safe transportation of COVID-19 vaccines in a constant temperature-controlled environment.⁸⁶

With the Doha Round⁸⁷ of trade negotiations among the WTO membership having stalled for several years, Singapore continues to augment its network of free trade agreements (FTAs) to grow its economic space and boost trade and investment flows.⁸⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has further underlined the urgency and imperative to broaden and deepen Singapore's economic linkages and connectivity with the world, open up opportunities and provide businesses with preferential access to growing markets.

On 15 November 2020, Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement on behalf of Singapore on the sidelines of the 37th ASEAN Summit.⁸⁹ Negotiations on the RCEP were formally launched in 2012 at the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia. The initial signatories are the ten ASEAN member states, Australia, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand. The RCEP establishes a modern, comprehensive and mutually beneficial economic partnership that builds on existing bilateral ASEAN agreements with its five FTA partners.⁹⁰

In December, Singapore and the United Kingdom signed the UK-Singapore FTA (UKSFTA), the first FTA between the United Kingdom and an ASEAN member state.⁹¹ The UKSFTA ensures trade continuity and provides companies with certainty in trading arrangements between the two countries, even as the United Kingdom exits the European Union. It will allow companies to continue enjoying the same EU-Singapore FTA (EUSFTA) benefits when trading between the two countries.⁹² Both countries also agreed to commence looking at the modules of a UK-Singapore Digital Economy Agreement (DEA) with the view to launching negotiations on it in 2021.⁹³ The signing of the UKSFTA serves as a significant step for the United Kingdom towards its goal of achieving membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Singapore supports and welcomes the intent by the United Kingdom to submit its application to accede to the CPTPP in early 2021.⁹⁴ Singapore also substantially concluded negotiations with the Pacific Alliance for the Pacific Alliance–Singapore Free Trade Agreement (PASFTA) in December.⁹⁵

New-found Stability in Ties with Malaysia?

Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was sworn in as Malaysia's prime minister on 1 March 2020 after the fall of Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Pakatan Harapan government the week before through the defections of more than thirty lawmakers. Despite the pandemic and Malaysia's domestic political challenges, bilateral ties have stabilized under PM Muhyiddin. Singapore's foreign minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan then said the island state was confident it would continue to have a "constructive, mutually beneficial relationship" with Malaysia under its new prime minister.⁹⁶

Before long, the first major test of this arrived. When Malaysia first imposed its movement-control order, including a lockdown of its borders to combat the spread of COVID-19 in mid-March, PM Muhyiddin assured PM Lee that the flow of goods and cargo between Singapore and Malaysia, including food and essential supplies, would continue uninterrupted. Before the coronavirus pandemic, over three hundred thousand people crossed the Causeway every day, including about a hundred thousand Malaysians who commuted daily between Singapore and Malaysia. Singapore had to roll out arrangements with its companies to help these Malaysian workers stay in Singapore temporarily.

Both leaders agreed to establish the Singapore-Malaysia Special Working Committee on COVID-19. Co-chaired by Singapore's senior minister and coordinating minister for national security Teo Chee Hean, Malaysia's senior minister and minister of defence Dato' Sri Ismail Sabri Yaakob, and Johor menteri besar Datuk Hasni, the committee was tasked to propose and coordinate a joint mitigation plan to ensure the safe and sustainable movement of people, goods and services between Malaysia and Singapore.⁹⁷ Coordinating joint responses to the COVID-19 outbreak, "particularly on measures where we can work together, or where the actions of one country will affect the other",⁹⁸ was crucial to both countries, reflecting their interdependence.

Singapore and Malaysia held a ceremony on 30 July to resume work on the cross-border Rapid Transit System (RTS) link between Woodlands and Johor Bahru following multiple postponements to the project.⁹⁹ The RTS will be a standalone light rail transit system instead of using the same trains and systems as Singapore's Thomson-East Coast MRT Line. The four-kilometre-long system is expected to commence passenger service by end-2026. It will help alleviate the congestion at the Causeway. At peak capacity, the RTS will be able to support up to ten thousand passengers per hour in either direction. The RTS will connect passengers between the Singapore terminus in Woodlands North and Johor's Bukit Chagar station via a twenty-five-metre-high bridge across the Straits of Johor. RTS Operations Pte Ltd, a joint venture company formed by Malaysia's Prasarana Malaysia Bhd and Singapore's SMRT Corporation Ltd, will operate the JB-Singapore RTS Link.

The year ended on a setback, however. On 1 January 2021, in a joint press statement, Malaysia and Singapore announced the discontinuation of the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High-Speed Rail (HSR) project. Malaysia had proposed several changes to the project, but the two governments could not to reach an agreement, resulting in the HSR agreement lapsing on 31 December 2020. Both countries stated they would abide by their respective obligations resulting from the termination, including Malaysia compensating Singapore.¹⁰⁰

Strengthening Ties with China

The year 2020 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between Singapore and China. In August, China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, visited Singapore and met PM Lee, DPM Heng and other leaders.¹⁰¹ This was the first foreign visit by a senior Chinese leader since March because of the pandemic. In December, the 16th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) was held.¹⁰² DPM Heng Swee Keat co-chaired the videoconference meeting with China's vice-premier Han Zheng. Ten memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and agreements were entered into.¹⁰³ DPM Heng identified connectivity, digitalization and sustainable development as critical areas for mutual collaboration in a post-COVID-19 world. Both countries agreed to expand the agenda to include public health as a new pillar of cooperation.¹⁰⁴ Key milestones in bilateral projects were noted at the meeting, including the fifth anniversary of the China-Singapore (Chongqing) Demonstration Initiative on Strategic Connectivity (CCI) and the tenth anniversary of the China-Singapore Guangzhou Knowledge City.¹⁰⁵

Both parties reaffirmed their commitment to enhance connectivity and free trade. They also announced the commencement of negotiations on the China-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (CSFTA) Work Programme for Subsequent Negotiations.¹⁰⁶ They agreed that Singapore and China can forge closer economic cooperation, including in China's regional development strategies, to bring benefits to the businesses and peoples of both countries.

Both sides also exchanged views on ways to strengthen collaboration in third-party markets under the BRI. They agreed to establish a working group to study the feasibility of co-developing a dispute-resolution mechanism tailored to Asia's needs. They reaffirmed the deepening legal and judicial cooperation and noted the appointments of a Singapore judge and a Singapore lawyer to the International Commercial Experts Committee of the People's Republic of China Supreme People's Court.¹⁰⁷

Both countries agreed to deepen cooperation in areas such as finance, smart cities, digitalization, innovation, China's regional development and development strategies, education, human resource

development, social governance, environmental protection and sustainable development, agri-food trade, food security, and cultural and tourism exchanges. Future collaboration to address common challenges can be expected as both countries emerge from the pandemic.¹⁰⁸

Maintaining Relations on an Even Keel with the United States

The United States was Singapore's largest foreign investor in 2019, while Singapore was the fourth-largest Asian investor in the United States.¹⁰⁹ In February 2020, the US government approved the sale of up to twelve F-35B Joint Strike Fighter jets to Singapore, the first such sale to a Southeast Asian country. Four jets, scheduled for delivery in 2026, are on order for initial evaluation, with the option of up to eight more.¹¹⁰

In December a two-year MOU was signed to deepen economic cooperation and extend trade financing and investment support to companies in Singapore and the United States amid the significant global tightening of credit following the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic. In addition, the MOU seeks to strengthen cooperation on investment promotion and provide opportunities for both countries to explore the use of technology (e.g. FinTech) to address new trade financing and investment challenges.

Singapore's consistent approach to the role of regional and global powers in Southeast Asian can be described as one of a "balance of power" in which the involvement of these powers in the region contributes to the overall development of the region and with no power dominating. In other words, these powers have a stake in the well-being, stability and prosperity of the region. In 2020, with Sino-US relations deteriorating, Singapore sought to sensitize both powers to the dangers of rivalry and confrontation on regional stability.

In a notable Foreign Affairs article, PM Lee cautioned that the emerging international order must not result in Southeast Asian countries, including Singapore, being caught in the middle of Sino-US rivalry or be forced into invidious choices of being compelled to choose between the two.¹¹¹ He argued that the United States (a "resident power" with vital interests in the region) and China ("a reality on the door stop") "must work out a modus vivendi that will be competitive in some areas without allowing rivalry to poison cooperation in others".

Should the United States attempt to contain China's rise or China seek to build an "exclusive sphere of influence in Asia", that would, in PM Lee's analysis, "begin a course of confrontation that will last decades and put the long-heralded Asian century in jeopardy". The "fundamental issue of our time", therefore, is whether both countries can "overcome their differences, build mutual trust, and work constructively to uphold a stable and peaceful international order".

These themes were also made by PM Lee at an Atlantic Council Front Page event on 28 July.¹¹² He put it in no uncertain terms that Washington's increasingly tense relationship with Beijing, coupled with its domestic pressures to reduce its commitments abroad, would eventually force the United States to choose either a path of "colliding with China" or "deciding that you have no stake in the region and leave us to our own defences". On the escalating confrontation between the countries, he acknowledged that "it is normal between two powers that you will have areas where you have contradictions and areas where you can work together", but he noted that there were "many areas where there are not only contradictions but also deep distrust. This is corrosive and it is making a very difficult relationship very dangerous." PM Lee was concerned that a new administration or a second Trump term would not calm things down between the two global powers as "the animus and—sad to say—bipartisan consensus on treating China as a threat is quite extraordinary and I fear that it may carry on over past the election. And if it does I think it bodes ill for the world."

For PM Lee, stability in Sino-US ties is of pivotal importance, and the most important objective for whoever won the US presidency in November was to "stabilise your relations with China because for the rest of Asia we depend on stable US-China relations in order for us to have a secure, predictable environment in which we can make a living and live our lives". He hoped that within the Beltway a

bipartisan consensus (on Asia) would develop so that there would be stability and predictability in US-Asian relations, which had see-sawed between the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" and the Trump administration's decision to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement.

Regardless of Race, Language and Gender: Consensus Needed on Way Forward

In September, law and home affairs minister K. Shanmugam announced the establishment of the "Conversations on Women Development" review, the first-ever comprehensive review of issues affecting women in the city-state. The public consultations will collate feedback and recommendations that will culminate in a White Paper to be delivered in Parliament in the first half of 2021.¹¹³ A key intent of the review is to improve the Singaporean culture and mindset on gender equality and respect for women.¹¹⁴ Mr Shanmugam said the discussions on the spate of recent offences against women in the universities prompted this initiative.¹¹⁵ Although women have progressed in areas such as education, the workforce, boards and politics, cultural, social and structural hurdles remain, he said.¹¹⁶

Another issue that saw much debate in the year was race and religion. To be sure, there is the view, especially among younger Singaporeans, that society should discuss the sensitive issues of race and religion more openly. This would require the redrawing of boundaries on discussions of race and religion and ground-up efforts to bring these difficult conversations into their respective communities.¹¹⁷ The issue acquired greater visibility during the general election when past Facebook posts by Workers' Party candidate Raeesah Khan—now an MP for Sengkang GRC—on foreigners flouting safe distancing rules became the subject of police reports lodged during the election. Ms Raeesah had asked if the law differed for "rich Chinese or white people". During the campaign, she apologized and said she had no intention to cause social division and wanted only to raise awareness about minority issues. Her response struck a chord among segments of Singaporeans. Ms Raeesah was issued a stern warning in September after the police concluded their investigations.

The issue was also touched on by President Halimah Yacob a month later at the opening of the 14th Parliament. The president emphasized that "Multiracialism will always be a core element of our Singaporean identity. Everyone, regardless of race, language, or religion, must have an equal place in our society.... But our multiracialism is still a work in progress. Younger Singaporeans prefer talking about these issues more candidly and openly, which is a positive development. But the conversation needs to be conducted with restraint and mutual respect, because race, language and religion will always be visceral subjects. If each group pushes its own agenda to the extreme, we risk eroding the common space, and fracturing our social cohesion."¹¹⁸

After fifty-five years of nationhood and having made good progress in inter-racial and inter-religious ties, Singapore can embark cautiously on more robust discussion and debate on the issue. What awaits at the end of this dialogue and engagement? A stronger sense of who we are, a nuanced understanding of our differences and a better appreciation of what needs to be done to become "one people, one nation, one Singapore".

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The year 2020 began and concluded with the abiding reality check of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 imposed a pause of sorts to many things that Singaporeans have taken for granted—be they international travel, how foreign migrant workers are treated, and the workers on the frontline and in essential services as the first responders to ensure that things don't fall apart amid an existential crisis. The exuberance that often precedes a new decennial had to make way for the grave concerns of a public health emergency and a potential economic crisis on a massive scale.

From a governance perspective, the pandemic response provides an opportunity for the 4G leadership to show their mettle. But this entails not only competence and confidence on their part, but how they carry the ground will also matter immensely in the people's assessment of their leadership. The past efforts of

nation-building and state-building by previous generations of Singaporeans and their leaders have enabled Singapore to muster a whole-of-government response backed by a quiet whole-of-society resolve and trust that Singapore will overcome the present challenges thrown by the pandemic, and even embark on a renewed endeavour to make needed changes.

And as Singapore makes determined strides to the “next normal”, what the state, government and people decide to remember and improve on from the normal that is not coming back could determine if the opportunity of the crisis is wasted or made good use of. A big unknown is whether the famed technocratic response and resilience will encompass the resolve to close the gap in the differential capabilities of the various segments of society. COVID-19, in other words, can be the catalyst for wide-ranging change—for better or for worse.

Footnotes

1. 1 In the 2019 edition of **Southeast Asian Affairs**, Khairulanwar Zaini used “holding pattern” as his leitmotif for Singapore that year. He noted that “Frequent travellers flying to Changi Airport may occasionally find their aircraft caught in a holding pattern, as their flight circles the airport while waiting for clearance to land”. See Khairulanwar Zaini, “Singapore in 2019: In Holding Pattern”, in **Southeast Asian Affairs 2020**, edited by Malcolm Cook and Daljit Singh (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020), p. 295.
2. 2 Ministry of Transport’s Addendum to President’s Address, 2020, <https://www.mot.gov.sg/news-centre/news/Detail/mot’s-addendum-to-president’s-address-2020-by-minister-for-transport-ong-ye-kung/>.
3. 3 Ibid.
4. 4 Changi Airport Terminal 2 suspended operations for eighteen months from 30 April 2020. The operations of Terminal 4 were suspended from 16 May. The consolidation of operations sought to optimize resources in light of the sharp decline in flights resulting from the global pandemic.
5. 5 As announced by then transport minister Khaw Boon Wan: “Changi Airport Terminal 5 Construction ‘Paused’ for at Least Two Years: Khaw Boon Wan”, CNA, 16 June 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/changi-airport-terminal-5-construction-paused-khaw-boon-wan-12840364>.
6. 6 DORSCON is the acronym for “Disease Outbreak Response System Condition”, a colour-coded framework indicating the current disease situation and providing general guidelines on what needs to be done to prevent and reduce the impact of infections. There are four levels—green, yellow, orange and red—reflecting the severity and spread of the disease. During the 2003 SARS outbreak in Singapore, the DORSCON status was also orange, meaning the disease was severe and could spread easily but was still contained. For further details, see <https://www.gov.sg/article/what-do-the-different-dorscon-levels-mean>.
7. 7 “Circuit breaker” (CB) was the term used by the Singapore government to refer to the elevated set of measures for safety and social distancing to pre-empt any increase of local transmissions of COVID-19. The CB was primarily enforced through the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) (Control Order) Regulations 2020, published on 7 April 2020.
8. 8 Prior to this the government had advised that a mask should only be worn if an individual was not feeling well. The government was mindful to remind Singaporeans that this was based on scientific advice and guidelines from the World Health Organization (WHO), and that there was no community spread in Singapore at the time. The underlying concern was that there would be insufficient masks in Singapore’s emergency stockpile should mask-wearing be made mandatory.
9. 9 PM Lee’s remarks on the coronavirus situation, 3 April 2020, <https://www.gov.sg/article/pm-lee-hsien-loong-on-the-covid-19-situation-in-singapore-3-apr>.
10. This suggests there were more people who were infected (and probably asymptomatic) but who were not identified. This meant that they might be infecting others unknowingly.
11. As we now know, COVID-19 is highly infectious. A single case can quickly lead to a large cluster, especially where large numbers of people live together in dormitories and nursing homes. Furthermore, nursing home patients are mostly old and frail, and very vulnerable to the virus.
12. The default rule was if a person can work from home, he should do so.
13. Limited services were available for children of parents who had to continue working and were unable to make alternative care arrangements.
14. Laws were also passed to require landlords to pass on property tax rebates fully to their tenants. New temporary legislation was enacted to let businesses and individuals defer certain contractual obligations for a period, such as paying rent, repaying loans or completing work.
15. PM Lee’s address on the COVID-19 situation in Singapore, 21 April 2020, <https://www.gov.sg/article/pm-lee-address-on-the-covid-19-situation-in-singapore-21-april-2020>.

16. These dorms house thousands of workers, with the largest accommodating 25,000 residents. The highest daily COVID-19 case count in the dormitories was recorded on 20 April 2020, with a total of 1,397 new cases detected among dormitory residents that day.
17. Unlinked cases are those infection cases where the authorities and infected persons do not know how they became infected or from whom. The more unlinked cases there are, the more likely it is that there is a larger, hidden reservoir of COVID-19 cases in the community that has not been detected.
18. For example, hairdressers and bubble tea shops were ordered not to open for business during part of the circuit breaker.
19. In 2020 there were more than 35,000 cases and 29 deaths from dengue, easily surpassing the previous record in 2013 of 22,170 cases.
20. Information in this section is from the MOH media release of 14 December 2020, “Measures to Contain the COVID-19 Outbreak in Migrant Worker Dormitories”, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/measures-to-contain-the-covid-19-outbreak-in-migrant-worker-dormitories>.
21. Excluding migrant workers, fewer than 4,000 people have tested positive in Singapore.
22. If a person tested serology-positive, it meant they had been infected earlier.
23. This is not surprising, as they were generally young and relatively healthy, and thus much less likely to become seriously ill with COVID-19. They were cared for in urgently built community-care facilities. Despite the scale of the outbreak in the dormitories, the morbidity and mortality rate among the migrant workers was very low. As at mid-December 2020, there were 25 COVID-19-related ICU admissions amongst migrant workers living in dormitories and only two deaths as a result of COVID-19, including one of those who had been admitted to the ICU.
24. The earliest cohort of migrant workers who have recovered from COVID-19 are exempt from RRT. They are monitored to better understand how their antibodies change over time. RRT will resume for these workers if their antibodies start to fade, or if there is evidence of re-infection among them.
25. QBDs are temporary structures that can last for two or three years and can be constructed quite quickly with a low density to accommodate about 25,000 people. Unused state properties include former schools and vacant factories, which will house another 25,000. CTQs are built near worksites.
26. Improved standards being piloted in the QBDs include the following: (1) An area of at least 6 square metres (not including shared facilities), an increase from the current 4.5 square metres per resident (including shared facilities); (2) A maximum of 10 beds per room, where only single-deck beds will be used and with one metre spacing between the beds. Currently there are no limits on the occupancy numbers per room. In practice, dormitories typically have between 12 and 16 beds per room and they are mostly bunk beds; (3) One toilet, bathroom and sink to every 5 beds, from every 15 beds currently; (4) More sick bay beds—at least 15 per 1,000 bed spaces from the current of 1 sick bay bed per 1,000 bed spaces. The government is also studying the possibility of developing purpose-built dormitories on a different model from the present system, whereby the land is currently released for commercial operators to bid on, build or operate. See joint Ministries of National Development and Manpower media statement on new dormitories with improved standards for migrant workers, 1 June 2020, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/2020/0601-joint-mnd-mom-media-release-on-new-dormitories-with-improved-standards-for-migrant-workers>.
27. All of these dormitories will have amenities like minimarts, barber services and indoor recreation facilities and the blocks will be well spaced out to ensure good ventilation. Workers living in these dormitories will have ready access to medical care and support. With additional housing capacity, the government will be able to move workers from the existing dormitories and undertake major upgrading to ensure that the new standards are met.
28. During Phase One (“Safe Re-opening”), places of worship could re-open for private worship for up to five households at a time and marriage solemnizations, wakes and funerals could take place. During Phase Two (“Safe Transition”), religious organizations could gradually resume more religious activities, including the conduct of congregational and other worship services for up to a hundred people. In the current Phase Three (“Safe Nation”), religious organizations are allowed to (1) conduct congregational and other worship services at higher capacity limits; and (2) involve live performance elements for congregational and other worship services, as well as religious rites. Worshipers can also participate in these activities in a larger group made up of not more than 8 persons (an increase from 5 persons), with the default one-metre safe distance maintained between groups. For further details, see press release of Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth, 26 December 2020, <https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/press-statements/2020/dec/phase-three-of-re-opening-religious-activities>.
29. See PM Lee Hsien Loong’s remarks on 14 December 2020 on the COVID-19 situation in Singapore, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-on-the-COVID-19-situation-in-Singapore-on-14-December-2020>.
30. Ibid. On government efforts to secure early access to vaccines, PM Lee said, “We placed multiple bets, to sign advance purchase agreements and make early down-payments for the most promising candidates, including with Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech, and Sinovac. We made arrangements with pharmaceutical companies to

- facilitate their clinical trials and drug development in Singapore, and attracted a few to establish vaccine manufacturing capabilities here. We also supported local efforts to develop a vaccine. This gave our own scientists and researchers the opportunity to do cutting edge work. It was also insurance, in case the global supply chain was disrupted. This way, we built up a diversified portfolio of options, to ensure that Singapore would be near the front of the queue for vaccines, and not last in line.” See also the government’s write-up accompanied by videos, “How Singapore Is Ensuring Access to COVID-19 Vaccines”, 23 December 2020, <https://www.gov.sg/article/how-singapore-is-ensuring-access-to-covid-19-vaccines>.
31. This is only the second time the WEF Special Annual Meeting will be held outside of Switzerland since its establishment in 1971. It will be the first time it will be held in Asia. It will also comprise a virtual component to allow greater participation amid the pandemic. See MTI media statement of 7 December 2020, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/12/MTI-Press-Release---Singapore-to-host-the-World-Economic-Forum-in-May-2021.pdf>.
 32. Ibid.
 33. See MTI’s and Temasek’s press releases of 15 December 2020 at, respectively, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/12/Press-Release-on-ConnctSingapore--15Dec20--final.pdf> and <https://www.temasek.com.sg/en/news-and-views/news-room/news/2020/singapore-consortium-led-by-temasek-launch-ConnectChangi-the-worlds-first-business-travel-exchange>.
 34. In this essay, ATBs refer to reciprocal arrangements for travel between two jurisdictions, such as the one with Hong Kong that was planned to commence on 22 November 2020 but was deferred because of a spike in COVID-19 cases in Hong Kong. It had earlier been agreed that the arrangement would be suspended if the seven-day moving average for unlinked cases exceeded five in either city. In an air travel bubble, people will be able to travel between the two places without the need to be quarantined, subject to conditions including testing negative for COVID-19 more than once.
 35. RGL facilitates short-term essential business and official travel between Singapore and counterpart countries or regions listed at <https://safetravel.ica.gov.sg/rgl/overview>.
 36. The ATP enables foreigners who are short-term visitors departing from selected countries or regions to seek entry into Singapore for any purpose of travel. See <https://safetravel.ica.gov.sg/atp/overview>. An ATP is a unilateral opening of Singapore’s border to travellers from selected countries or regions. As of end-December 2020, short-term visitors from Australia, Brunei, China, New Zealand, Taiwan and Vietnam were allowed to enter Singapore and travel freely as these countries were deemed to have comprehensive public health surveillance systems and had successfully controlled the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Such travellers need not serve a stay-home notice but must apply for an air-travel pass, test negative on arrival, and download and use the TraceTogether app while in Singapore. The policy aspiration is for ATPs to “graduate” to ATBs. As Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung, a strong proponent of ATBs, said: “We hope they [countries or regions for which Singapore permits ATP applications] will reciprocate. They can look at Singapore’s numbers—we are really controlling the virus quite well for now. ... Hopefully, I think some time next year, different partners will be willing to open up travel bubbles”. See “Singapore Looking to Set up New Air Travel Bubbles: Ong Ye Kung”, *Straits Times*, 7 December 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-looking-to-set-up-new-air-travel-bubbles-ong-ye-kung>.
 37. “Safe cruises” were piloted from November 2020 with enhanced safety protocols for two cruise lines that are homeported in Singapore. To provide assurance for safe cruising, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) developed a mandatory CruiseSafe certification programme, which sets out stringent hygiene and safety measures for throughout the journey—from prior to boarding, to after disembarkation. See STB’s press release of 7 October 2020, <https://www.stb.gov.sg/content/stb/en/media-centre/media-releases/safe-and-gradual-resumption-of-cruising.html>. The STB noted in the press release that Singapore was “one of the first countries in the world to develop and implement a mandatory audit and certification programme for cruise lines before they can commence sailings”.
 38. See PM Lee Hsien Loong’s remarks of 14 December 2020 on the COVID-19 situation in Singapore, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-on-the-COVID-19-situation-in-Singapore-on-14-December-2020>.
 39. The National Heritage Board (NHB) describes it as “a living heritage shared by those who prepare hawker food and those who dine and mingle over hawker food in community dining spaces called hawker centres. It reflects our multicultural identity as a people and nation, and resonates strongly with Singaporeans across all races and social strata. It is at the heart of everyday life in Singapore—people from all walks of life gather at hawker centres to dine and bond over food prepared by hawkers”. See NHB’s write-up at <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/sector-development/unesco/hawker-culture-in-singapore>. The inscription marked the culmination of Singapore’s two-year nomination journey for Singapore’s hawker culture. Separately, the Singapore Botanic Gardens was successfully inscribed as Singapore’s first UNESCO World Heritage Site on 4 July 2015.
 40. PM Lee’s Chinese speech at the National Day Rally 2018, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/national-day-rally-2018-speech-chinese>.

41. Clearly, the ruling party saw a general election in Phase 2 as conferring on it a strategic advantage in terms of timing. With the public health situation (apart from in the foreign worker dormitories) largely under control after the circuit-breaker, the government found it apt to look for a suitable window of opportunity to conduct the GE. The 13th Parliament was one of the longest-running Parliaments in Singapore's history. Several previous Parliaments were dissolved even before the four-year mark. There were only about six months and three weeks remaining of the 13th Parliament's term when it was dissolved.
42. In truth, there is never a good time for an election with a global pandemic raging. The critical reference date is not 14 April 2021 (which is three months after the end of the 13th Parliament's term) but rather 14 January 2021. If the 13th Parliament had completed its five-year term and elections had been conducted promptly, there would be no Parliament after 14 January 2021 for at least a month. This could be challenging if there was a need to pass urgent laws to deal with COVID-19. Similarly, supplementary Budgets could not be passed.
43. Things could have instead got worse. And if things had become worse in the months ahead, especially with the impact of the economic fallout yet to manifest, no one would have been able to tell whether voters would be prepared to punt for the political alternatives. In his address to the nation on 23 June 2020, PM Lee made the observation that "An election now—when things are relatively stable—will clear the decks, and give the new Government a fresh, full, five-year mandate. It can then focus on this national agenda and the difficult decisions it will have to make and to carry. The alternative is to wait out the COVID-19 pandemic. But we have no assurance that the pandemic will be over before this Government's term must end next April." The transcript of PM Lee's remarks is available at <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/Speech-on-GE2020-by-PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong>.
44. The EBRC report was submitted to PM Lee on 11 March 2020 and laid before Parliament on 13 March 2020. It is available at <https://www.eld.gov.sg/pdf/White%5fPaper%5fon%5fthe%5fReport%5fof%5fthe%5fElectoral%5fBoundaries%5fReview%5fCommittee%5f2020.pdf>. The report is not qualitatively different from previous ones. In fact, the report has a "template feel" to it, with the contents being no different from those of earlier EBRC reports. Consistent with previous reports, the EBRC merely stated that boundaries had been re-drawn "taking into account the current configurations, changes in the number of electors due to population shifts and housing developments" since the previous boundary delineation exercise in July 2015. Such a generic statement did not explain, for instance, why the EBRC recommended doing away with the SMCs of Fengshan, Punggol East and Sengkang West, which saw PAP-WP contests in the 2015 general election. The WP had earned two NCMP seats from these three contests. In fact, Fengshan was carved out of East Coast GRC for the 2015 election but was made part of the GRC again in GE2020.
45. Compared with the previous general election in 2015, this is an increase of four seats, one more SMC, six four-member GRCs (no change) and eleven five-member GRCs (up from eight). There was no six-member GRC for the first time since it was introduced in 1997.
46. The PAP has not shed light on its decision to field DPM Heng in East Coast GRC. Former prime ministers Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong remained in the same constituencies for all their electoral contests. The late Mr Lee represented Tanjong Pagar from it being a single seat to a GRC between 1955 and 2015, while Mr Goh was synonymous with Marine Parade between 1976 and 2020. Similarly, PM Lee had been MP of Teck Ghee SMC and later Ang Mo Kio GRC since he entered politics. It was highly unusual to re-deploy a prime-minister-in-waiting.
47. In his Bloomberg interview, Mr Lee Hsien Yang said of his entering the political arena as a card-carrying opposition party member: "The PAP of today is no longer the party of my father. It has lost its way. My father founded the party when he was the voice of trade unions and seafarers. It started out as a champion of the underdog. And he always put the interests of Singaporeans and the country first. Today, many see the PAP as having lost touch with the ground. ... I share the PSP vision for a more compassionate and progressive Singapore.... Singapore does not need another Lee in political office." He denied any personal agenda (specifically, the family feud over the fate of the Oxley Road family home) in his political foray and his speaking out against the government, adding that "My sister [Dr Lee Wei Ling] and I do not need a political platform to respond to attacks by our brother." See "Singapore PM's Brother Sees 'Real Anger' Brewing before Election", Bloomberg, 7 July 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-07/singapore-pm-s-brother-sees-real-anger-brewing-before-election>.
48. Mr Low was Singapore's longest-serving opposition MP, holding office between 1991 and 2020. Mr Chen Show Mao (Aljunied GRC) and Mr Png Eng Huat (Hougang SMC) were the other two WP MPs who did not contest in 2020.
49. See the ELD's preliminary campaigning guidelines for GE2020 issued on 18 June 2020, <https://www.eld.gov.sg/press/2020/PRESS%5fRELEASE%5fon%5fPRELIMINARY%5fCAMPAIGNING%5fGUIDELINES%5fFOR%5fGENERAL%5feLECTION%5fUNDER%5fCOVID-19.pdf>.
50. What was lost was the cauldron of excitement that Singaporeans could immerse themselves in, and which comes only once every three to four years. At physical rallies, spectators and speakers feed off the energy of

- each other. This energy that comes from a crowd listening attentively and responding to questions and provocations was not easily replicated online. A crowd is good for whipping up support, catcalls, jeers and cheers. Online, the reactions, if at all, will be more subdued since the mass participation was absent. Speakers also found it harder to connect to voters because they were speaking to a screen and could not see, hear or feel how the audience was responding to their speeches.
51. Ironically, the pandemic has interrogated how wealth creation and economic growth can be attained and shared as well as exposing the soft underbelly of Singapore society. It laid bare the vulnerabilities, gaps and divides within society such as income inequality. The unfolding pandemic in the six months preceding the general election was a rude reality check. Voters were not staring at an imminent crisis; they were already right in the eye of the storm. The PAP's manifesto was largely concerned with the impact of COVID-19, which made the party appear tone-deaf in not appreciating voters' concerns going beyond bread-and-butter issues. On the other hand, the opposition engaged voters on issues that resonated with them, especially post-material concerns.
 52. See the POMA Office website for the various orders issued by several Alternate Authorities during the campaign period at <https://www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg/media-centre/>. Under POFMA, the permanent secretaries for all sixteen ministries and several portfolios in the Prime Minister's Office exercise the powers of the ministers under POFMA during the election period. When a Writ of Election is issued, ministers cease to have the power to issue orders under POFMA, but these powers may be exercised by an Alternate Authority—a senior civil servant whom the respective ministers must designate beforehand.
 53. See the ELD's press release, "Total Votes Cast at Singapore General Election 2020", <https://www.eld.gov.sg/press/2020/Press%5fRelease%5fon%5fTotal%5fVotes%5fCast%5fat%5fSingapore%5fGeneral%5fElection%5f2020.pdf>. Voting is compulsory in Singapore.
 54. In GE2020 there were 1,097 polling stations compared with 832 in 2015. Twenty per cent more election officials were deployed, making a grand total of 36,000 officials.
 55. See "ELD's Findings on Sustained Queues at Some Polling Stations in General Election 2020," 10 September 2020, <https://www.eld.gov.sg/press/2020/Press%5fRelease%5fELD%5ffindings%5fon%5fsustained%5fqueues%5fat%5fsome%5fpolling%5fstations%5fin%5fGeneral%5fElection%5f2020.pdf>. The ELD also noted that "There were no reported Covid-19 community cases affecting voters and election officials as a result of their participation in GE2020."
 56. See ELD's press release of 10 July, <https://www.eld.gov.sg/press/2020/Press%5fRelease%5fon%5fExtension%5fof%20Voting%5fHours%5fto%5f10pm.pdf>.
 57. "Voting Hours Extended to 10pm, Opposition Parties Criticise Move", Straits Times, 10 July 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ge2020-voting-hours-extended-to-10pm>.
 58. See the full results at <https://www.eld.gov.sg/finalresults2020.html>. Two NCMP seats were declared to be elected for the PSP for turning in the best performance by their West Coast GRC team among losing opposition candidates/teams.
 59. See Facebook post of 19 July 2020 at <https://www.facebook.com/TharmanShanmugaratnam/posts/3651296858233112?%5f%5ftn%5f%5f=K-R>. SM Tharman said the results were good for the PAP: "First, it secured a solid mandate. Trust in the PAP to run government and do what is best for Singaporeans is intact. Second, the swing in votes (though from an unrepeatable high in 2015) is leading the party to review its own game so as to win the hearts, and not just the minds, of a changing electorate. The results were also good for opposition politics—and not merely because they won more votes collectively. The stronger vote for the WP than others, with its more reasonable brand and eschewing of campaigning around a single political figure, reflected a discerning public and a political culture that bodes well for Singapore...".
 60. Unlike other crises—for example, the post-9/11 situation in the GE of 2001—voters in 2020 were already in the eye of the storm. Much had been made of how voters tend not to rock the boat in times of crisis and adopt a flight-to-safety posture.
 61. Whether the opposition can build on the inroads of GE2020 in the next general election will be crucial. The PAP was able to claw back opposition gains from the general elections of 1991 and 2011 in the subsequent elections of 1997 and 2015.
 62. The 4G leadership refers to Singapore's next generation of political leaders currently in their forties and fifties. DPM Heng is the putative leader. PM Lee Hsien Loong, third prime minister, is from the third generation. His immediate predecessor, Goh Chok Tong, who was prime minister between 1990 and 2004, is from the second generation, while the late Lee Kuan Yew (PM between 1950 and 1990) is of the founding generation.
 63. The success of the WP, and of the PSP contesting in its first election, will likely encourage Singaporeans to consider these parties as attractive alternatives to the PAP. For the other smaller parties, which continued to

- not make any meaningful progress in this election from the previous two, they risk becoming irrelevant to the political landscape.
64. PM Lee's 36th Ordinary Party Conference speech on 8 November 2020, <https://www.pap.org.sg/news/secretary-general-lee-hsien-loong-36th-ordinary-party-conference-speech/>.
 65. "WP Chief Pritam Singh to Be Named Leader of the Opposition", Straits Times, 11 July 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/wp-chief-to-be-named-leader-of-the-opposition>.
 66. See Ministerial Statement on duties and privileges of the Leader of the Opposition by Ms Indranee Rajah, Leader of the House, 14th Parliament, 31 August 2020, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/Ministerial-Statement-on-Duties-and-Privileges-of-the-Leader-of-the-Opposition-Aug-2020>.
 67. For instance, PM Lee exhorted the opposition by saying, "I hope our colleagues across the aisle will step up to play their role of a responsible and loyal opposition. Their duty is not merely to raise criticisms and ask questions of the government, necessary as these functions are. But also, more importantly, to put forward serious policy alternatives to be scrutinised and debated. This way, we can help voters better understand the issues, choices and trade-offs. And in the process, improve policies and plans, and deliver better outcomes for Singapore". See PM Lee's speech at the swearing-in ceremony for the Cabinet and other office holders on 27 July 2020, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/Speech-by-PM-Lee-at-the-Swearing-In-Ceremony>.
 68. He said then that Singapore "should not have a prime minister who is 70 years old or more than 70 years old.... And you have to be in sync with the new generation of people. You may be in touch but you are not of that generation." See "Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew Well, Intends to Travel—Son", Reuters, 2 November 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-52613820101102>.
 69. In early November, former senior minister Professor S. Jayakumar remarked that he was glad that Mr Lee had given himself "some flexibility on the succession timeline". For Prof Jayakumar, "however capable the 4G leaders, we should not change horses in midstream". Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong chimed in with a post on Facebook: "For us, stay strong together to reach the bank safely—with sturdy, fresh horses waiting." The timing of these remarks near the PAP conference was unlikely to be coincidental. For Mr Lee, Mr Goh, Mr Teo and Prof Jayakumar, it is only right, proper and prudent to have the changing of the guard only when the COVID-19 public health and economic crises are put to bed.
 70. Going by precedent, it is not unusual for Singapore's outgoing premiers to hand over power on a clean slate. For example, Mr Lee Kuan Yew did so on 28 November 1990, a day after securing points of agreement with his Malaysian counterpart, Dr Mahathir Mohamed, on Malayan Railway Land in Singapore, which had been a long-time bugbear in bilateral relations. Likewise, Mr Goh handed over the reins of government on 11 August 2004 after the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 had been decisively dealt with.
 71. DPM Heng introduced the Resilience Budget on 26 March, the Solidarity Budget on 6 April, the Fortitude Budget on 26 May and the Ministerial Statements on 17 August and 5 October 2020. See the Finance Ministry Budget 2020 website at <https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget%5f2020/home>.
 72. For further details, see <https://www.singaporebudget.gov.sg/budget%5f2020/budget-measures>.
 73. See Economic Survey of Singapore: Third Quarter of 2020 (Singapore: Ministry of Trade & Industry, November 2020), <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Resources/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore/2020/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore-Third-Quarter-2020/FullReport%5f3Q20.pdf>.
 74. See MTI press release of 19 November 2020, "The Emerging Stronger Taskforce Offers a glimpse into a Future Economy that is Connected and Sustainable", <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/11/EST-Press-Release---19-Nov-2020.pdf>.
 75. Ibid. at Annex A.
 76. AfAs are industry-led coalitions that work in close partnership with the government on key growth opportunities for Singapore. The seven AfAs are (1) Securing our Economic Future through Supply Chain Digitalisation; (2) Building Singapore as a Little Green Dot through Sustainability; (3) Digitalising Built Environment to Build Tomorrow's Cities; (4) Bringing Singapore to the World through Smart Commerce; (5) Breaking the Productivity Frontier through Robotics Solutions; (6) Reconnecting with the World through Safe and Innovative Visitor Experiences; and (7) Reaching the World's Learners through EduTech.
 77. On the rationale for the Cabinet's decision to proceed with the development of IRs, which would include casino gaming, at Marina Bayfront and Sentosa, see statement by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in Parliament on 18 April 2005 at <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Legislation/Public-Consultations/2012/Additional-Information-on-the-Integrated-Resorts/ministerial-statement---pm-18apr05.pdf>.
 78. The proposed GRA will work with partners such as MSF and the National Council on Problem Gambling to ensure that the harms of gambling continue to be adequately addressed. The police will continue to enforce the laws against illegal gambling activities. See MHA media release of 3 April 2020, "Establishment of Gambling Regulatory Authority and Review of Gambling Laws", <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/press-release/news/establishment-of-gambling-regulatory-authority-and-review-of-gambling-laws>.
 79. See MAS media release of 4 December 2020, <https://www.mas.gov.sg/news/media-releases/2020/mas-announces-successful-applicants-of-licences-to-operate-new-digital-banks-in-singapore>. The DFB licences

- were awarded to a consortium comprising Grab Holding Inc. and Singapore Telecommunications Ltd and an entity wholly owned by Sea Ltd. The DWB licences were awarded to a consortium comprising Greenland Financial Holdings Group Co. Ltd, Linklogis Hong Kong Ltd and Beijing Co-operative Equity Investment Fund Management Co. Ltd and to an entity wholly owned by Ant Group Co. Ltd.
80. Ibid.
 81. See IMDA’s media release of 29 April 2020, <https://www.imda.gov.sg/news-and-events/Media-Room/Media-Releases/2020/Singapore-Forges-Ahead-with-Nationwide-5G-Rollout> and “Singapore Telcos Pick Nokia, Ericsson over Huawei to Build Main 5g Networks”, Reuters, 24 June 2020.
 82. The COVAX Facility is a global risk-sharing mechanism that seeks to procure, equitably allocate and deliver two billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of 2021. Singapore is one of ninety-seven self-financing participants (as of 25 November 2020) in the facility. The implementing partners of the facility are the World Health Organisation, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations.
 83. Singapore and Switzerland co-chair the Friends of the COVAX Facility (FOF) to support the work of the COVAX Facility. The FOF comprises the following fourteen countries and the European Union: Australia, Canada, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, Norway, Qatar, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. The statement is available at <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2020/09/20200921---FOF-Statement>.
 84. Joint Press Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health, “Singapore’s Contribution to the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Advance Market Commitment”, 4 December 2020, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/news-highlights/details/joint-press-statement-by-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-the-ministry-of-health-singapore%27s-contribution-to-the-covid-19-vaccine-global-access-advance-market-commitment>. AMC eligible countries include several ASEAN countries as well as small states globally.
 85. “Singapore Wants to Be Hub for COVID-19 Vaccine Transport, Says Ong Ye Kung”, Straits Times, 22 December 2020.
 86. Besides the need for timely deliveries, the different vaccines may have complex handling requirements. For instance, the Pfizer vaccine requires storage at minus seventy degree Celsius.
 87. The Doha Round was officially launched at the WTO’s Fourth Ministerial Conference in Doha, Qatar, in November 2001.
 88. For a listing of Singapore’s bilateral and regional FTAs, see <https://www.enterprisesg.gov.sg/non-financial-assistance/for-singapore-companies/free-trade-agreements/ftas/singapore-ftas>.
 89. Ministry of Trade and Industry, “Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement Signed”, 15 November 2020, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/11/Press-Release-on-the-Regional-Comprehensive-Economic-Partnership-Signing.pdf?la=en&hash=92B4146DE1C4B39724B8DDC24F6701F317E511CB>.
 90. Comprising about 30 per cent of global gross domestic product and close to a third of the world’s population, RCEP is the world’s largest FTA to date.
 91. Singapore is the United Kingdom’s largest trade and investment partner in Southeast Asia. The United Kingdom is the largest European destination for Singaporean investments.
 92. This includes tariff elimination for goods trade, increased access to services and government procurement markets, and a reduction of non-tariff barriers, including in four major sectors: electronics, motor vehicles parts, pharmaceutical products and medical devices, and renewable energy generation.
 93. According to the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), “The UK-Singapore DEA will serve as a pathfinder for modern rules on digital trade and financial services between Europe and Southeast Asia”. This potentially could be the launch pad for UK banks to apply for licences as digital wholesale banks in Singapore. In paragraph 4 of the MTI media release it was stated that “The UK-Singapore FTA will support financial services trade and investment in both countries, and provide opportunities for existing UK Qualifying Full Banks in Singapore to expand their footprint, including through additional customer service locations.” 10 December 2020, <https://www.enterprisesg.gov.sg/-/media/esg/files/non-financial-assistance/for-companies/free-trade-agreements/uksfta/uksfta%5fpress%5frelease%5fon%5fsigning%5fof%5fthe%5fuk%5fsingapore%5ffree%5ftade%5fagreement.pdf?la=e>.
 94. Ibid. The CPTPP is an FTA comprising eleven countries: Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam, all of which are members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). The CPTPP was signed on 8 March 2018 in Santiago. Singapore ratified the CPTPP on 19 July 2018, after Mexico and Japan. The CPTPP is the successor to the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was the centrepiece of US president Barack Obama’s strategic pivot to Asia. Before President Donald J. Trump withdrew the United States from the TPP in January 2017 in one of the significant acts upon his inauguration, the TPP was to be world’s largest free trade deal, covering 40 per cent of the global economy. Upon the withdrawal by the United States, the remaining TPP countries entered into a revised version of the pact but one that kept most of the original intact. US President-Elect Joe Biden has said

- that he does not support the CPTPP as it currently stands but he may try to renegotiate it to include stronger labour and environmental provisions.
95. The Pacific Alliance (PA), a Latin American grouping comprising Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, was established in June 2012. Collectively, it is the eighth-largest economy worldwide, and the seventh-largest exporter in the world. It has a combined GDP of US\$4.05 trillion, accounting for approximately a third of Latin America's total GDP. See MTI media release of 12 December 2020, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/12/Press-Release--Substantial-Conclusion-of-Negotiations-on-the-Pacific-AllianceSingapore-FTA--12-Dec-2.pdf>.
 96. "Thaw in Singapore-Malaysia Ties Expected with Muhyiddin in Charge, Say Analysts", TODAY, 9 March 2020, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/thaw-singapore-malaysia-ties-expected-muhyiddin-charge-say-analysts>.
 97. See Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs media statement, "Establishment of Singapore-Malaysia Special Working Committee on COVID-19", 17 March 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2020/03/170320%5fSingapore-Malaysia-Working-Committee-on-COVID>.
 98. "Flow of Goods, Food Supplies, Cargo to Continue between Singapore and Malaysia: PM Lee", CNA, 17 March 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-malaysia-cargo-goods-border-restrictions-12547142>.
 99. "Singapore and Malaysia Hold Ceremony to Resume Work on Woodlands-Johor Rail Link; Operations Expected to Begin at End-2026", Straits Times, 30 July 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-and-malaysia-sign-deal-to-resume-work-on-woodlands-johor-rail-link>. Both countries had signed a binding agreement to build the RTS link in January 2018. Key project deadlines were missed, however, after the Pakatan Harapan coalition led by Mahathir Mohamad came to power less than five months later. While Singapore could have enforced its legal rights and sought full compensation from Malaysia, it chose instead to suspend both projects through formal agreements and grant Malaysia more time to review its position and propose amendments in the spirit of "constructive bilateral cooperation". In November 2020, Singapore's Land Transport Authority (LTA) awarded the first of two civil contracts for the construction of the RTS: see "LTA Awards S\$932.8m Contract to Build Johor Bahru-Singapore RTS Link", Business Times, 26 November 2020, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/transport/lt-awards-s9328m-contract-to-build-johor-bahru-singapore-rts-link>.
 100. See joint press statement of 1 January 2021, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/Joint-Press-Statement-on-the-Kuala-Lumpur-Singapore-High-Speed-Rail-Project>.
 101. Yang is also a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs.
 102. The JCBC is the institutionalized annual high-level bilateral platform overseeing and providing direction to Singapore-China bilateral cooperation.
 103. Reflecting the breadth of bilateral cooperation, the ten MOUs and agreements concluded at the 16th JCBC were as follows: (1) MOU on Health Cooperation, (2) MOU on Food Safety Cooperation, (3) MOU on China-Singapore (Tianjin) Customs Twinning Cooperation, (4) MOU on the Mutual Translation and Publication of Singapore China Classics, (5) MOU on the Establishment of a Working Group to Study the Feasibility of Co-Developing a Dispute Resolution Mechanism, (6) MOU on Health Policy Fellowship Exchange, (7) Joint Paper on Enhancing Environmental Cooperation in the Post COVID-19 Era, (8) MOU on Biomedical Cooperation between Singapore and the SIP, (9) MOU on Nanyang Technological University China (West) Entrepreneurship and Innovation Project, and (10) Agreement on Deepening Cooperation on the Sino-Singapore International Joint Research Institute.
 104. The co-chairs also welcomed the MOUs on Health Cooperation and Health Policy Fellowship Exchange and agreed to explore collaboration in vaccine manufacturing and distribution.
 105. The meeting incorporated the steering committee meetings for the 21st China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), 12th Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City (SSTEC), and 4th China-Singapore (Chongqing) Demonstration Initiative on Strategic Connectivity (CCI). These are the three government-to-government projects between Singapore and China.
 106. Singapore was the first Asian country to have a comprehensive bilateral FTA with China when the agreement came into effect on 1 January 2009. The first review of the agreement was completed in July 2011. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang and Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong signed the upgrade of the 2009 CSFTA on 12 November 2018 in Singapore.
 107. They are Justice of the Court of Appeal (JCA) Steven Chong and senior lawyer Michael Hwang, SC, who were appointed to a four-year term in December 2020. See China International Commercial Court media release of 8 December 2020, "The Decision on the Appointment of the Second Group of Members for the International Commercial Expert Committee of the Supreme People's Court", <http://cicc.court.gov.cn/html/1/219/208/210/1876.html>.

108. For details, see Prime Minister’s Office media release, “16th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation and Related Joint Steering Council Meetings”, 8 December 2020, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/16th-Joint-Council-for-Bilateral-Cooperation-and-Related-Joint-Steering-Council-Meetings>.
109. See MTI media release of 16 December 2020, <https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Newsroom/Press-Releases/2020/12/Press-release-on-signing-of-MOU-on-trade-financing-and-investment-cooperation-between-SG-and-US.pdf>
110. “Singapore’s F-35 Jet Purchase Part of Longstanding Bilateral Relationship: US Official”, Straits Times, 10 February 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/purchase-of-f-35-jets-part-of-long-standing-relationship-with-singapore-us-officials>. These fifth-generation stealth fighters can take off from shorter runways and land vertically, making them suitable for land-scarce Singapore.
111. Lee Hsien Loong, “The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation”, *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2020), pp. 52–64.
112. See interview at the Atlantic Council website, “Singapore’s Prime Minister Has a Message for the US: Don’t Choose China Confrontation or Asia Withdrawal”, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/singapores-prime-minister-has-a-message-for-the-us-dont-choose-china-confrontation-or-asia-withdrawal/>.
113. The review is jointly led by Minister of State for Social and Family Development, and Education Sun Xueling, Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth, and Trade and Industry Low Yen Ling and Parliamentary Secretary for Health Rahayu Mahzam.
114. See K. Shanmugam’s speech of 20 September 2020, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/news/conversations-on-women-development-speech-by-mr-k-shanmugam-minister-for-home-affairs-and-minister-for-law>.
115. In a subsequent interview, Mr Shanmugam said, “If [gender equality] is more deeply ingrained, my hope is that [potential offenders] will be less inclined, or they will understand the consequences much more, and then they will not treat it like a prank or something to satisfy themselves, they will more carefully consider that they should not [commit the offence]”. See “Review on Women’s Issues Goes beyond the Law, Aims to ‘Deeply Ingrain’ Gender Equality in Society: Shanmugam”, CNA, 24 September 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/hotm-podcast-shanmugam-review-gender-equality-women-issues-13137558>.
116. In the United Nations Human Development Report of 2019, Singapore ranked 11th out of 162 countries for gender equality. It also ranked first in the Global Innovation Index 2020 for the proportion of females employed with advanced degrees.
117. “Youth Must Decide Limits of Race and Religion Discussions: Shanmugam”, Straits Times, 26 July 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/youth-must-decide-limits-of-race-and-religion-discussions-shanmugam>.
118. See the President’s speech, “Securing Our Future in a Different World”, 24 August 2020, <https://www.istana.gov.sg/Newsroom/Speeches/2020/08/24/Address-by-President-Halimah-Yacob-for-First-Session-of-the-Fourteenth-Parliament>.

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