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Foresight and Policy: Thinking About Singapore's Future(s)

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FORESIGHT AND POLICY

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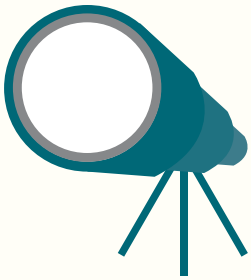

The last three decades have seen the Singapore government's strategic foresight enterprise shift from the area of defence and security to the socio-aspirational space. Lead Strategist, **Dr Adrian W. J. Kuah** discusses how strategic planning in the governing of Singapore has evolved over the years.

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Those working in the field of strategic foresight will readily tell you, even if in hushed whispers, that they do not have it easy. It was difficult enough in the early days of defining the field after the Second World War, and it has certainly gotten more challenging in recent years when those working in "futures"—analysts, strategists, forecasters, futurists, call them what you will—were seen to have failed spectacularly in predicting any number of catastrophic social, economic and political events. Again, take your pick: the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, 9/11, the US sub-prime mortgage crisis, various pandemics, the Great Recession, and the Eurozone debt crises.[1]

Clearly, the foresight enterprise is fraught with many difficulties. Ought we then to be doing it at all? The fact of the matter is that we, as a human species, cannot not think about the future (although different people will think about the future in varying degrees and ability). As Wendell Bell puts it:

> In every known society, people have conceptions of time and the future, even though some of their conceptions appear diverse, with different emphases on past and future and different degrees of elaboration and detail.[2]

To the extent that we are aware that actions have consequences (intended or otherwise), we already implicitly consider the future. The rationale for the Singapore government's strategic foresight enterprise is based on the argument articulated above – the future *is* inextricably linked to present action.

While most of the methods and tools – chief of which being "scenario planning" based on the Royal Dutch Shell's own practice – were developed in the 1980s, the philosophical justification for developing Singapore's strategic foresight capability can be traced to a 1979 speech, titled *Singapore into the 21st Century*, by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratnam. With typical elegance and persuasiveness, Rajaratnam argued that futures thinking is integral to Singapore's long-term prospects:

> There are practical men who maintain that such speculations are a waste of time and they have no bearing at all on solutions to immediate day-to-day problems. This may have been so in earlier periods of history when changes were few and minute and

> were spread over decades and centuries...[Because] we are not only living in a world of accelerating changes but also of changes which are global in scope and which permeate almost all aspects of human activity...[and since] change is about the future *then only a future-oriented society can cope with the problems of the 21st century*.[3]

There in 1979 lay the philosophical (but overlooked) foundations of Singapore's foresight enterprise.[4]

What is of interest is not so much why the strategic foresight enterprise had found, and certainly continues to find, such traction in the Singapore government, but rather *how* it has evolved over time. This evolution can best be understood in two ways. The first is an *ontological shift* in focus, expanding beyond defence and security to include issues in the socio-aspirational space, such as quality of life, definitions of success, national myths, questions of identity and so forth. The second is an *epistemological* shift in approach, expanding from a largely positivist worldview (that is, taking the world as given) to a more eclectic and normative perspective that views the world in terms of how it can be shaped.

THE ONTOLOGICAL SHIFT: FROM SECURITY TO THE SOCIAL, FROM THREATS TO ASPIRATIONS

The ontological shift in Singapore's strategic foresight enterprise can best be understood in the actual shifts in both the physical and organisational locations of the foresight apparatus.

The initial conceptualisation and eventual development of scenario planning occurred within the Ministry of Defence in the 1980s, as the brainchild of then Deputy Secretary Peter Ho:

> Singapore's efforts at [formal] futures planning began as an experiment in the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF), in the late 1980s... Scenario studies were carried out in the Scenario Planning Branch, with *security as their primary concern*.[5]

In that regard, the genesis of Singapore's foresight enterprise is no different from how various think tanks and foresight agencies also had their origins in the defence and security domain. Indeed, the most famous think tank of all, RAND (an acronym standing prosaically for *R*esearch *AN*d *D*evelopment), started life in late 1945 as a collaboration between the Douglas Aircraft Company and the Army Air Corps, drawing together the various operations researchers and war managers from the Second World War.[6]

The Scenario Planning Branch within MINDEF was envisaged to augment the ministry's strategic, acquisition and budgetary planning cycle which typically took a long-term perspective of 10 to 15 years. Again, this mirrored RAND's early work for the US Department of Defense which took the form of "policy alternatives, evaluations, designs, theories, suggestions, warnings, long range plans, statistics, predictions, descriptions of techniques, tests, analyses or, simply, new ideas."[7]

The decision in 1991 for the scenario planning tool and techniques to be adopted in the broader government beyond MINDEF signalled two important shifts. First, there was a belief that other ministries and agencies could greatly augment their own futures thinking through these systematic techniques and formal tools. It would, of course, be naive to conclude that, prior to "scenario planning," Singapore's policy-makers went about their work without what Rajaratnam called the "future-oriented" perspective. After all, as has been pointed out by many commentators, planning is an integral and inseparable element of Singapore's policy-making DNA, brought particularly into sharp relief by a sense of acute vulnerability (in both geopolitical and economic terms).[8] However, the formalisation of the foresight enterprise throughout the establishment signalled strongly the primacy of strategic foresight in underpinning all manner of policies.

The diffusion of futures thinking throughout the broader establishment, and of scenario planning in particular, was also accompanied by a significant reorganisation of the strategic foresight policy apparatus: chiefly, the creation of the Scenario Planning Office (SPO) within the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in 1995 under the guidance of the then Permanent Secretary in the PMO, Lim Siong Guan.[9] This new entity, in a sense, "owned" the scenario planning process for the government, and given its vantage point in the overarching PMO, it was almost inevitable that its focus – the ontological bedrock of its futures work – would move beyond the "hard-core" traditional defence and security issues to incorporate the "softer" issues

in the socio-cultural domain: demographic changes, social resilience, the politics of identity (or identities), housing, education, and so forth.

The inaugural *National Scenarios*, widely regarded as SPO's flagship product, were rolled out in 1997, and the two principal scenarios reflected and cemented the ontological shift beyond the security domain to incorporate the myriad complexities of the social, cultural and political dimensions.[10] Still considered the most memorable and influential set of scenarios, the 1997 iteration (which had a 20-year perspective) postulated two possible futures: "Hotel Singapore" on the one hand, in which the economic imperative will reign supreme and where the price of commercial success and global cosmopolitanism was paid in terms of increased atomism and a sense of *anomie* and dislocation. The second scenario, "A Home Divided," painted a future in which the singular national narrative would splinter, giving way to a plethora of irreconcilable stories that are centred on different loci of identities—ethnic, religious, special interests, ideology, all of which potentially challenging the national identity.

Given the social, economic and political developments of the last five years, the 1997 scenarios turned out to be extremely prescient. The process of generating the scenarios also turned out to be as instructive as the outcome, if not more so:

> In the course of working on these scenarios, we discovered that while geopolitical and economic issues were well on the decision-makers' radar screens, softer "social" issues like national identity, rootedness to Singapore and community ties received less attention.[11]

That aspirational and identity issues unexpectedly came to the fore in the course of researching and interviewing for the 1997 scenarios completed the shift not only in terms of focus but more crucially in the underlying ontological assumptions: from security threats assumed to be *ontologically objective*, to social hopes and fears which are *intersubjectively* constituted but experienced as no less than "real." In 2003, the Scenario Planning Office was renamed the Strategic Policy Office, an acknowledgement of the increasingly holistic, complex and subjective manner in which Singapore's future(s) was being defined.

In a sense, we have come full circle, albeit having done things back-to-front. Singapore's strategic foresight enterprise had its roots in the military-security milieu, grappling with the question of "How do we secure 'us'?" It is only belatedly that we have begun to address the more fundamental question of "Who is 'us'?" And yet Bell reminds us that, fundamentally, members of collectivities—societies, organisations, and nations—find meaning and purpose in their charter or founding myths, where such myths form the basis for their societal identity and values. He further argues that the "charter myths of a particular group or society [is] a standard by which to evaluate the desirability of alternative images of the future..."[12]

Fast forward to the present from the 1997 scenarios, and there is an irony in realising that charting the way(s) ahead for Singapore rests on revisiting our charter myths. The "Our Singapore Conversation" (OSC), a nation-wide "town hall meeting," was launched by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 2012 National Day Rally to get people to articulate their "desirable futures" for Singapore.[13] In one sense, therefore, the OSC can be seen as an exercise in strategic foresight.

To a large extent, the OSC has turned out to be an attempt to address "where we are going" by way of "who we are and where we come from." This is clearly demonstrated in how participants reminisced about the "kampong spirit" (real or imagined) of yesteryear:

> I pray that our country will be more caring towards the old and have the kampong spirit to help each other.

> [N]obody appears to really care for one another's well-being as well. There is a loss of kampong spirit, that sense of neighbourliness.[14]

The road to the future appears to run through the past.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SHIFT: FROM UNCOVERING FUTURES TO SHAPING THEM

In articulating what might be termed the French school of strategic foresight, *la prospective*, Hughes de Jouvenel argues:

> As neither prophesy nor prediction, *la prospective* (foresight) does not aim to predict the future—to unveil it as if it were pre-fabricated—but to help us to build it. It invites us to consider the future as something that we create or build, rather than something already decided, like a mystery that simply needs to be unravelled.[15]

De Jouvenel provides a useful analytical point of departure to understand the changing epistemology of the strategic foresight enterprise in Singapore. Because the fact of the matter is that, despite many protestations to the contrary, strategic foresight, in many places and at various times, *has* almost always begun *as if* it were prophesy and prediction, where the sole purpose of the exercise was to "unveil a pre-fabricated future". Singapore has been no exception.

Given the importance of the national defence imperative, the language of military strategy and operations lends itself naturally to explaining how futures work was initially conducted. The Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, in his treatise *On War*, continually reminds us of the uncertainties of war, stating in one memorable passage:

> War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. A sensitive and discriminating judgment is called for; a skilled intelligence to scent out the truth.[16]

Understood in Clausewitzian terms, scenario planning in MINDEF sought to lift the temporal "fog of war": developing net assessments of the current state and *future* trajectory of Singapore's military capabilities in relation to other countries, identifying and analysing "the enemy's" *likely* courses of actions, and *anticipating* political, socio-economic and technological shocks that could alter the military and geopolitical status quo.

Singapore's pioneering attempts at strategic foresight consisted mainly in the application of tools and techniques that allowed the foresight practitioner to "see a *thing*" ahead of his rivals and competitors, be it a nascent social trend, a developing political pattern, an economic point of inflexion, or an emerging technology. This epistemological approach can best be described as positivist, which assumes, in the main, that through the use of scientific methods and the application of rational analysis, it is possible to discover the "truth" of things.[17] For all the sophistication of other foresight tools that were subsequently adopted—the Risk Assessment Horizon Scanning (RAHS) programme under the National Security Coordination Secretariat, the tools centred on the *Cynefin* framework[18]—to supplement scenario planning, strategic foresight remains largely informed by a positivist worldview. Needless to say, there remains a natural fit between a positivist epistemology—manifested most clearly in the application of tools—and aspects of the future that are deemed to be ontologically objectively "real" (such as geopolitical risks and military threats), out there waiting to be uncovered.

Despite the many limitations of the positivist worldview —the chief of which being the privileging of the scientific, rational method above all else to get at "the truth" —the fact is that a positivist epistemology, along with the many tools and techniques that go with it, remains very useful... *to a point*. That point occurs when objective risks which can be assessed and mitigated give way to aspirations that are subjectively and dynamically articulated. The process of producing the 1997 *National Scenarios* had given some hint of the growing salience of the more ephemeral, abstract and subjective socio-political and cultural issues, which were confirmed in the subsequent iterations of the scenarios.

The growing importance of aspirations, identities, values and reinterpretations of charter myths in charting Singapore's possible futures necessitated an expansion of the epistemological toolkit to incorporate post-positivist perspectives. The setting up of the Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF)[19] within the SPO in 2009, whose mandate of challenging the dogmas, orthodoxies and "groupthink" that might have permeated the foresight establishment through the use of eclectic and experimental approaches, was endorsed at the highest levels. It was, above all, an acknowledgement that, to borrow from De Jouvenel:

> [The] future is a realm of freedom, of power and of will. It is at once a land to be explored, hence the utility of vigilance and anticipation,... and a land

"FURTHERMORE, AS THE CONVERSATION HAS UNFOLDED, THE SHIFT IN FOCUS FROM THREATS TO ASPIRATIONS HAS BEEN SO STARK AS TO BRING A NEW VOCABULARY BUILT ON TERMS LIKE 'NARRATIVE','MYTH', 'VALUES' AND 'IDENTITY' TO THE FOREFRONT OF SINGAPORE'S PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS."[22]

> to be built on, hence the utility of the approach to prospective sometimes described as "normative", which refers to the investigation not of possible futures but of desirable futures...[20]

The notion that strategic foresight, and public policy more broadly, would have to take into account the aspirations, interests, hopes and fears of Singaporeans has manifested itself most resoundingly in the OSC.

Of course, history will ultimately judge the usefulness and ultimate impact of the OSC. Nevertheless, the OSC has been an intriguing and welcome evolution of Singapore's strategic foresight enterprise for three reasons. First, the OSC concept is driven by the idea of "co-creation," of a partnership between those who govern and those who are governed. Strategic foresight, in this instance, becomes very much more of a collective enterprise, and less so the elite-driven phenomenon it typically is. Second, insofar as it is a dialogue, an often messy and dynamic process of articulations, negotiations, compromises, persuasions and concessions, it suggests that the strategic foresight enterprise may be valued more as a process, rather than the outcomes that it generates. Indeed, the OSC was deliberately unstructured "with no specific preset topics or areas for discussion...to provide as much open space as possible for Singaporeans to voice their opinions."[21] Compared to previous dialogues such as 1991's "The Next Lap," 1999's "Singapore 21," and 2002's "Remaking Singapore," the OSC is novel in how the power to set the agenda lay almost exclusively with the participants.

Finally, and most importantly, the very term "conversation" is extremely apt and highly instructive: it suggests the power of speech acts, of "talking" the future into existence. Furthermore, as the conversation has unfolded, the shift in focus from threats to aspirations has been so stark as to bring a new vocabulary built on terms like "narrative," "myth," "values" and "identity" to the forefront of Singapore's public consciousness.[22] The ability to understand and engage with this new vocabulary of strategic foresight lies beyond traditional positivist foresight tools; rather, it is through the eclectic suite of post-positivist, phenomenological approaches, such as the Causal Layered Analysis methodology,[23] that are part of the CSF's toolkit that this new inter-subjectively constituted vocabulary can be apprehended and made sense of.

CONCLUSION

The past, present, and the future are inextricably intertwined. The past continues to cast its shadow on an ephemeral present. Furthermore, far from being immutable, the ever-present past is subject to constant revisions and reinterpretations; the past, in a sense, can be changed. Similarly, our present assumptions and images of the future shape our current actions, which in turn produce the future "present."

Singapore in the early 21st century finds itself buffeted by dramatic and escalating changes, whether they are framed in terms of Alvin Toffler's "Third Wave," Karl Polanyi's "Great Transformation," Manuel Castell's "Network Society," Francis Fukuyama's "Great Disruption," or Douglas Rushkoff's "Present Shock." Amidst these complexities and accelerations, the strategic foresight enterprise becomes ever more salient, even if increasingly difficult. We are acting in a continually shifting and extended present into which the future is assimilated.

Furthermore, the growing importance of aspirations and the new modality of co-creating desirable futures by both the state and society jointly suggest that Singapore's foresight policies, far from being the straightforward application of tools and techniques, will have to be guided by the Aristotelian trinity of *logos* (the "how" of things), *ethos* (the questions of values and ethics), and *pathos* (how well we identify with each other). After all, what is strategic foresight but an attempt to articulate and attain "the good life"?

Clearly, the future ain't what it used to be. ■

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of, and should not be attributed to, the Centre for Strategic Futures.

Endnotes

1 See, for example, Dan Gardner, *Future Babble: Why Expert Predictions Are Next To Worthless and You Can Do Better* (London: Dutton, 2011).

2 Wendell Bell, *Foundations of Futures Studies, Volume 1: History, Purposes, and Knowledge* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 2.

3 Speech by Mr. S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Foreign Affairs, *Singapore into the 21st Century*, at a seminar organised by the Singapore Association for the Advancement of Science at the Singapore Science Centre on 20 December 1979. Reproduced in Kwa Chong Guan, ed., *S Rajaratnam on Singapore: From Ideas to Reality* (Singapore: World Scientific and the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, 2006), 238-48 [additional terms and italics mine].

4 That the philosophical justification for what we now know as strategic foresight came only in 1979, and that the formal development and diffusion of rigorous techniques and tools only occurred in the 1980s, should not obscure the fact that an orientation towards the future had been hardwired into the psyche of the policy-maker from the outset, even if sans the formal tools and concepts. In a sense, the policy-makers in the newly independent Singapore found themselves in an environment fraught with myriad possibilities for the future, even as dangers abounded. Singapore's developmental trajectory from "Third World" status to "First World" arguably speaks to the foresight, among other attributes, of its founding fathers in navigating such turbulent times.

5 Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office, Singapore, *Conversations for the Future, Volume 1: Singapore's Experiences with Strategic Planning (1988 – 2011)* (Singapore: Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office, Singapore, 2011), 10 [additional terms and italics mine].

6 Bell, *Foundations Volume 1*, 28-9.

7 Paul Dickson, *Think Tanks* (New York: Antheneum, 1972), 23-26.

8 See Linda Low's *Political Economy of a City-State* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1996) for an account of economic planning and strategy. The geopolitical corollary to this would be Michael Leifer's Singapore's Foreign Policy: *Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000).

9 See Chapter 1 of Public Service Division, Singapore, *Conversations* for background to the scenario planning process within the Singapore government. For an interesting external perspective, please see Tuomo Kuosa's *Practising Foresight in Government: the Cases of Finland, Singapore, and the European Union* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, 2011), 47-51.

10 Since the inaugural 1997 National Scenarios, four more sets were produced in 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2011.

11 Public Service Division, Singapore, *Conversations*, 10.

12 Wendell Bell, *Foundations of Futures Studies, Volume 2: Values, Objectivity, and the Good Society* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 141-142.

13 For a primer on the "Our Singapore Conversation" background and process, please see "About Our Singapore Conversation," www.oursgconversation.sg/about-our-singapore-conversation.

14 These are quotes from OSC participants, from the OSC newsletter *Perspectives Arising From Our SG Conversation*, www.oursgconversation.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/OSC_newsletter.pdf.

15 Hughes de Jouvenel, *An Invitation to Foresight*, trans. Helen Fish (Paris: Futuribles, 2004), 6.

16 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 101.

17 I have relied on the clear and succinct exposition on epistemology in general, and positivism in particular, in Mary Jo Hatch and Ann L. Cunliffe's *Organization Theory, Second Edition: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13-4.

18 For more information on the RAHS programme, please see "RAHS Programme: Origin and Progress," http://app.rahs.gov.sg/public/www/content.aspx?sid=2952. For the *Cynefin* Framework, developed by Dave Snowden and his Cognitive Edge group, please see "Introduction to the *Cynefin* Framework", http://cognitive-edge.com/library/more/video/introduction-to-the-cynefin-framework.

19 For the background to the setting up of the Centre of Strategic Futures, please see "The Centre for Strategic Futures: Vision, Mission and Key Roles," www.psd.gov.sg/content/psd/en/csf/csf_aboutus/csf_vision_mission_key.html

20 De Jouvenel, Invitation, 10.

21 "About Our Singapore Conversation" website, www.oursgconversation.sg/about-our-singapore-conversation/

22 For example, see a 22nd October 2012 commentary (Adrian W. J. Kuah, *Defining Singapore: Reconciling the National Narrative with the Global City Ethos*, RSIS Commentaries, www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/RSIS1962012.pdf) by the author, in which he notes:
Even more than the predictable bread-and-butter issues of economic growth, job prospects, housing and so forth, the issues of the Singaporean identity, national values, rootedness and the sense of belonging, and the social fabric have come to the fore...Such abstract and ephemeral issues, long held to be subordinate to the more tangible – and therefore assumed to be more important – concerns of jobs and homes, suggest a renewed interest in the nation-building enterprise. After all, notions of place and belonging, values and identity, shared history and future, are nothing if not integral parts of the national narrative.

23 For a concise introduction to the Causal Layered Analysis methodology, which in a sense can be seen as an exercise in Foucauldian discourse analysis, please see the introductory essay by its creator Sohail Inayatullah, "Causal Layered Analysis|Post-structuralism as Method," www.metafuture.org/Articles/CausalLayeredAnalysis.htm.