



1. NATIONAL DAY MESSAGE AND RALLY 2021

PM Lee Hsien Loong delivered his National Day Message on 8 Aug and his National Day Rally (NDR) speech on 29 Aug. Here are his key points from both speeches:

Coping with COVID-19

- Singapore's vaccination programme is going well, with 80% of the population vaccinated as of 29 Aug. This puts us in a more resilient position and will help us open up and live with an endemic COVID-19.
- During this crisis, Singaporeans stepped up to support one another and have showed the world how strong we can be.

Addressing job anxiety and economic insecurities

- Economic growth is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and must be inclusive. To ensure this, we have to:
 - **Support lower wage-workers**, who need emergency assistance and longer term support.
 - **Manage anxieties over foreign workers.** While Singaporeans understand the need to welcome talent, some may be worried about job competition. However, our policies and mindsets must remain outward-looking. Non-Singaporeans here must also accept the ethos and norms of our society.

“From time to time, new crises will again test our resolve and unity. But COVID-19 has shown that we can face them with grit and determination, and stay one united people.”

– PM Lee in his National Day Message on 8 Aug

Growing the Economy

- With COVID-19 under control, and having survived our worst economic crisis since independence, we must now change gears for the future.
- To sustain longer term growth, we need to preserve our status as a business hub, attract foreign investments, and grow Singapore companies and entrepreneurs.

Managing race and religion

- Race relations have come under stress during the pandemic, which remind us how fragile our racial harmony is. However, these incidents do not negate our multi-racial approach.
- Racial harmony came about through the hard work of our founding leaders, which enabled people of different races and faiths to live together harmoniously.
- Today, it remains a delicate balance, and a work in progress. As our social norms evolve, racial harmony needs to be refreshed, affirmed, and reinforced. The majority must be sensitive to the concerns of the minorities, and Singaporeans must take a stand against racism.

“A harmonious, multiracial country is not a natural or stable state of affairs. It does not happen by itself and it does not stay there by itself.”

– PM Lee in his National Day Rally on 29 Aug

Key Announcements from the NDR 2021

Starting from Nov 21, **Muslim nurses will be allowed to wear a tudung** with their uniforms.

- In Apr 21, there were discussions on allowing Muslim nurses to wear the tudung at work.
- PM Lee emphasised that this change was a careful adjustment to keep Singapore's racial and religious harmony in good order – an approach that has allowed us to become a multiracial and multi-religious society.

Schemes to help lower-wage workers will be extended to cover eight in ten lower-wage workers.

- The Progressive Wage Model (PWM), which sets out minimum pay and training requirements, will be extended to more sectors.
- Companies that pay workers progressive wages will be accredited with the progressive wage mark.
- Companies employing foreigners will be required to pay all local employees the Local Qualifying Salary of S\$1,400.

New laws against discrimination.

- The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment (TAFEP) guidelines will be written into the law to ensure fair treatment in the workplace.
- A new Maintenance of Racial Harmony Act will be introduced. While existing laws are mainly punitive, the new law will take a “softer approach [to] heal hurt, instead of leaving resentment.”

[Sources: PMO, ST, CNA & TODAY, 8 & 29 Aug]

2. ADVANCING SG-US BILATERAL RELATIONS



From 22 to 24 Aug 21, US Vice President Kamala Harris made an official visit to Singapore. This followed US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to Singapore in July. VP Harris had discussions with our leaders, affirming the strong and broad-based relationship between Singapore and the US and discussing the expansion of bilateral cooperation to strengthen people-to-people ties and address global challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Here are some key areas of discussion:

- **Economic ties between the US and Singapore are flourishing.** The US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (USSFTA), signed in 2004, was the US' first with an Asian country. Bilateral trade has more than doubled since then. Today, Singapore is the second largest Asian investor in the US, while the US is our largest foreign direct investor.
- **New areas of cooperation.**
 - Three MOUs were signed by the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore (CSA), the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) and the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF), and their respective US partner agencies. Both sides will also:
 - Launch a Climate Partnership to collaborate on climate action and environmental governance.
 - Establish a US-Singapore Supply Chain Dialogue.
 - Collaborate on pandemic preparedness and issues related to space.
- **The US has played a constructive role in in the region,** particularly in security and defence. Singapore is a Major Security Cooperation Partner of the US. Both sides collaborate on transnational issues, such as terrorism, cybersecurity, and counter-proliferation. The US also participates in ASEAN and regional fora, such as the ADMM-Plus.
- **Afghanistan.** Singapore offered the Republic of Singapore Air Force's (RSAF) A330 Multi-Role Tanker Transport to help with the efforts to evacuate civilians out of Afghanistan. The aircraft and crew were deployed on 26 Aug, three days after the US accepted PM Lee's offer to help with evacuation.



[Sources: PMO and MFA, 23 Aug; MINDEF, 27 Aug]

3. SINGAPORE AND US-CHINA RELATIONS

In the run-up to and after VP Harris' visit, Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan gave several media interviews where he touched on Singapore's position in relation to the competition between US and China, and the transition to a multipolar world. Here are his key points:



Singapore is in “uncharted territory”. The rise of China, even as the US remains a leading superpower, poses new challenges and opportunities.

- For example, in the field of technology, if both superpowers can work out rules and norms of engagement to “compete” and “collaborate”, it can lead to another “golden age” in the digital arena.

Singapore will not take sides, as our relevance depends on whether we can maintain our independence. We will take positions depending on the issues, and what is in our long term national interests.

- For example, on the South China Sea, Singapore is not a claimant state, but we have interests at stake as the South China Sea is key to maritime trade. As a small state, Singapore believes there are peaceful ways of resolving disputes, and in the need to maintain ASEAN unity and centrality.

“*What I hope for is a Singaporean public that is well informed, that understands the geostrategic forces [...] [and] our own national interests.*”

– Dr Balakrishnan in a CNA interview on 22 Aug

Singapore will be useful but not made use of.

- Dr Balakrishnan said that Singapore has made itself relevant to both the US and China, but there is a distinction between “being useful and being made use of.” In the event of bifurcation between US and China, Singapore “will not become one or the other’s stalking horse to advance negative agendas.”

Southeast Asia has great growth prospects in the next 20 to 30 years, and increased Chinese engagement in the region is a good thing.

- Dr Balakrishnan emphasised that Southeast Asia has been a beneficiary of the reform and opening-up of China under Deng Xiaoping. China is now ASEAN’s largest trading partner, and vice-versa.
- A developed, engaged China that trades and invests in the region has been, and will be, constructive to peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia.

“*It is essential for the US and China to have very high level discussions [...] in order to build a working, viable constructive relationship, and to start to rebuild some of that strategic trust.*”

– Dr Balakrishnan in a CNBC interview on 26 Aug

[Sources: MFA: 16, 20 & 26 Aug; CNA, 22 Aug]

4. THE TALIBAN'S RETURN TO AFGHANISTAN

In Aug 21, troops from the international military coalition withdrew from Afghanistan after a 20-year war targeting Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Following the US' withdrawal, the Taliban took over most of Afghanistan, leading to the collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces. Here's what happened:

- **On 14 Apr**, US President Biden announced plans to withdraw all US troops from Afghanistan between 1 May and 11 Sep.
- **In May and Jun**, the Taliban gained control of more districts across Afghanistan. The US military withdrew from Kandahar – Afghanistan’s second-largest airbase.
- **On 2 Jul**, US officials announced the departure of all American and NATO troops from Bagram – Afghanistan’s largest airbase.
- **By 21 Jul**, the Taliban controlled about half of Afghanistan’s districts.
- **In the first half of Aug**, the Taliban moved swiftly across Afghanistan, capturing Kandahar and Herat. On 15 Aug, the Taliban captured the capital, Kabul. Afghan President Ghani had fled Afghanistan that same day.
- **In the second half of Aug**, evacuation flights, organised by the US and other nations, left Kabul airport.
- **On 26 Aug**, two suicide bombs exploded at the entrance of Kabul airport, killing more than 180 people. ISIS Khorosan (or ISIS-K, an offshoot of the Islamic State), later claimed responsibility for the attacks.
- **On 30 Aug**, US military departed Afghanistan a day earlier than expected.



Reactions from the UN

On 30 Aug, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution that required the Taliban to honour their commitment to let people freely leave Afghanistan and condemned the 26 Aug bombing at Kabul Airport. The resolution:

- Called on the Taliban to allow “full, safe, and unhindered access” for the UN and other agencies to provide humanitarian assistance.
- Reaffirmed the importance of upholding human rights, and encouraged parties to seek an inclusive, negotiated political settlement.
- Underscored that Afghanistan must not be used to threaten other countries, shelter or train terrorists, or to plan or finance terrorist acts.

[Sources: Al Jazeera, 11 & 12 Aug; Global News, 28 Aug; New York Times, 30 Aug; CNA, 31 Aug]

5. MALAYSIA'S 9TH PRIME MINISTER: ISMAIL SABRI YAAKOB

On 21 Aug, Ismail Sabri Yaakob from the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) was sworn in as Malaysia's Prime Minister. He was most recently Deputy PM and Defence Minister in the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government, led by Muhyiddin Yassin. Here is what happened:



- **16 Aug:** Muhyiddin resigned after months of political instability that led to his loss of majority support in Parliament. Several UMNO Members of Parliament (MPs), led by party President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, had withdrawn support for him.
- **17 Aug:** Malaysia's 220 MPs were asked to submit a statutory declaration to the Palace, stating their preferred prime minister candidate. A total of 114 MPs picked Mr Ismail Sabri, while 105 picked Anwar Ibrahim, who has since urged his supporters to accept Ismail Sabri's appointment.
- **18 Aug:** In an audience with leaders of major political parties, the King decreed that all should work as one team.

On 22 Aug, PM Lee congratulated PM Ismail Sabri on being sworn in as Prime Minister. He expressed confidence that with PM Ismail Sabri's wealth of experience in the public service and government, Malaysia will continue to prosper under his leadership. He said:



- Malaysia and Singapore enjoy multi-faceted relations. We share many common interests and have cooperated over the years.
- PM Ismail Sabri has contributed significantly to strengthening bilateral cooperation, including co-chairing the Singapore-Malaysia Special Working Committee on COVID-19 to oversee the continued movement of people and goods across our borders.
- PM Lee invited PM Ismail Sabri to make an official visit to Singapore to discuss ways that both sides can cooperate. In response, PM Ismail Sabri said that he looked forward to visiting Singapore and meeting PM Lee.

[Sources: CNA, 21 Aug; MFA and CNA, 22 Aug; CNA, 23 Aug]

[Any feedback on this issue? Let us know through <https://go.gov.sg/feedbacknif>, or email us at nexus@defence.gov.sg.]

