

1. STRENGTHENING OUR DEFENCES

Defending against future pandemics



COVID-19 has affected the way we live. During the pandemic, various segments of society rallied together to contain and manage the pandemic. In his speech during the Committee of Supply Debate (COS) on 1 Mar, Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen spoke about the contributions of the SAF and the DSO National Laboratories (DSO) in the fight against COVID-19.

He said that our steady investments in defence over the years had allowed us to maintain capabilities such as 40 bio-personnel and secure biological labs in DSO, as well as about 250 doctors and paramedical staff in the Medical Corps.

Scan the QR code for Dr Ng's full speech.



Here are some examples Dr Ng mentioned:

How did we help?

COVID-19 emerged in Singapore at the end of Jan 2020. **Within a month, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests** were made available by DSO. DSO also **improved PCR and antigen testing**, releasing the RESOLUTE 2.0 PCR kits which played a great role in managing the outbreaks in the migrant worker community.

Over 6,000 MINDEF/SAF personnel were deployed to help in various areas, such as packing five million masks in two days, stabilising the foreign worker dormitories' outbreak, setting up Community Care and Recovery Facilities, and more.

Medical Corps and DSO staff worked with the Ministry of Health (MOH) to validate serological tests, testing as many as **40,000 a week**. This **prevented Community Care Facilities from becoming overwhelmed**.

Why must we keep building our capabilities?

Future pandemics may be worse than COVID-19. **We can only rely on ourselves**, and not other countries, to defend us. To protect ourselves, we must build the capabilities to combat any future threats.



Scan the QR code to read more on how MINDEF/SAF is transforming itself for the future to combat various threats.

Upgrade of DSO biosafety labs

By the end of 2025, the first highest-level biosafety containment lab in Southeast Asia will be ready in Singapore. Around \$90 million will be invested by MINDEF to upgrade the DSO National Laboratories facilities to biosafety level 4 (BSL-4). Many developed countries already have such labs.

- This will allow DSO to safely handle viruses classified in Risk Groups 4, the highest level, on top of handling viruses like SARS and COVID-19. With the new lab, **Singapore will have the capability to safely handle, assess, and develop countermeasures against more severe forms of viruses** in the future.

While the SAF has played an important role in this fight, the success of Singapore’s defence also requires the efforts of all Singaporeans. In his COS speech, Senior Minister of State for Defence Mr Zaqy Mohamad thanked servicemen and all Singaporeans for playing their part in Total Defence and contributing to the fight against COVID-19.

Scan the QR code for Mr Zaqy’s full speech.



Image: Gov.sg

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Your actions have shown that with everyone doing their part for Total Defence, we will emerge stronger from this crisis of our generation, and with greater confidence in our future. This is why we continue to invest in Total Defence – to best prepare for, to respond to and to recover from any crisis. We will continue to build Total Defence into every Singaporean’s DNA to meet the threats of today and tomorrow.

– Senior Minister of State for Defence Mr Zaqy Mohamad on 1 Mar

[Sources: BT, MINDEF & ST, 1 Mar]



Image: MHA

The three threats to Singapore

In her COS speech on 1 Mar, Minister for Manpower and Second Minister for Home Affairs Mrs Josephine Teo highlighted that Singapore remains one of the safest places in the world, ranking first in the Gallup Global Law and Order Report as well as the 2020 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index in the area of “Order and Security”. However, there are three threats that Singapore still faces:

Scan the QR code for Mrs Teo’s full speech.



- 1. Terrorism.** It remains a serious threat as one successful attack can seriously damage Singapore. For **trans-national threats**, Singapore has **strong working relationships with foreign security agencies** to share intelligence and disrupt attempts. However, **local threats are more difficult to detect**, as individuals may be self-radicalised.
- 2. Foreign interference in domestic politics.** These interferences, which can take various forms such as **hostile information campaigns** and **subversion operations** to manipulate domestic political discourse, have increased in recent years. Singapore needs to remain open to the world for our economy, but this also presents infiltration opportunities for foreign actors. **Singaporeans must build up the ability to discern** what is true and false online. However, this may not be enough as such foreign operations are increasingly complex and well-concealed.
- 3. Online harms.** With the internet, **harmful content** such as violent extremist propaganda or the unconsented sharing of intimate images **are disseminated more quickly and easily**. MHA is working with MCI to put in place new regulations to combat such issues.

[Sources: MHA & ST, 1 Mar]

Radicalised Singaporean detained under the Internal Security Act

On 10 Mar, it was revealed that a 20-year-old former NSF had been detained for plotting to attack Jewish men at the Maghain Aboth Synagogue in 2019 and 2020. He had also arranged to join the military wing of the Hamas group in Palestine, in its fight against Israel.

- He was self-radicalised, with his interest in the Israel-Palestine conflict spurred after viewing a video which showed Israeli fighter jets bombing Palestinian civilians in 2014.
- This is the second case this year of a thwarted terror attack on a place of worship, the first being a 16-year-old self-radicalised Singaporean student who planned to attack two mosques in Sembawang and Woodlands and kill Muslims there.
- After the announcement of the arrest, Muslim leaders visited the Maghain Aboth Synagogue, and together with Jewish leaders, reaffirmed the harmonious relationship between the two communities. They committed on behalf of their respective communities to reject all forms of extremism, radicalism and violence, and affirmed that the actions of such individuals are not reflective of the community’s beliefs.

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We all agree that our peace and harmony is a blessing and gift we must never take for granted nor compromise. Our commonalities are much stronger than any differences.

– Mufti Dr Nazirudin Mohd Nasir on 10 Mar

[Sources: CNA, MHA, & ST, 10 Mar]

2. SAFEGUARDING COMMUNITIES

On 1 Mar, Law and Home Affairs Minister Mr K Shanmugam spoke about ensuring secularity and neutrality in policy making in Singapore, with no one group being favoured. Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth & Trade and Industry Mr Alvin Tan also spoke about plans to help vulnerable groups. Here is a summary of the key points:

Secularity and neutrality in policy making



1. For the past 62 years, the **principles of secularity and neutrality** between religions has always been one of the “**golden threads**” in Singapore’s public policy making. It was rooted in the basic principle followed since August 1965, when then-Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew declared that Singapore would be a multi-racial nation, and all would be equal regardless of language, culture, or religion.
2. The **recent amendments to the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act** is a reinforcement of this stance, and **strengthened Singapore’s ability to safeguard against and respond more effectively to threats against religious harmony**. It was amended together with the religious leaders, and affirmed by 680 religious organisations and 73 community groups.

3. Regarding the **LGBTQ community** in Singapore, he emphasised that regardless of social, religious, or sexual beliefs, **all would be protected here**. Action will be taken against any individual who stirs up hate speech.

Scan the QR code for Mr Shanmugam’s full speech.



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Neutrality and fairness are essential. Otherwise, in this small country we will lose the trust of the people quickly [...] And when these principles are not observed, they must be dealt with.

– Minister for Law and Home Affairs Mr K. Shanmugam on 1 Mar

[Sources: CNA, MFA, & ST, 1 Mar]

Aiding those in need

1. Many youths, especially those from **low-income backgrounds**, have been affected by COVID-19, and face issues related to jobs or family. There are plans to help these youths, such as **strengthened mentoring opportunities** to empower them to make informed career and life decisions, and to proactively identify students who require **financial assistance**.
2. **Mental well-being** is also an important area of focus. A whole-of-society effort is needed to create an **inclusive and caring society** where no individual has to take on mental health struggles alone. The **Youth Mental Wellbeing Network** provides mental health support for youths, and the government is also working with tech companies such as Facebook and TikTok to provide **enhanced community support resources** for users. Ways of equipping youths with **peer support capabilities** are being looked at.
3. Support for **vulnerable groups** such as **single mothers and low-income families** are also being looked at, and will be included in the upcoming White Paper. Last year, youths were also involved in the discussion of MHA and MinLaw’s review of the sentencing framework for hurt and sexual offences, which is a move to **support and protect vulnerable women**.



Scan the QR code for Mr Tan’s full speech.



[Sources: MCCY, 24 Oct; ST, 25 Feb; MCCY, 8 Mar]

3. SINGAPORE AND THE WORLD: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE POST-COVID WORLD



In the initial days of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many Singaporeans stuck overseas. Flights were disrupted and borders were closed. However, thanks to Singapore's relations with the world, we were able to bring back, to date, over 4,500 Singaporeans and their families. In his COS speech on 1 Mar, Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan explained how our diplomatic capital helped us, the future of Singapore's international relations in the post-COVID world, and the three risks Singapore faces in the coming years.

Scan the QR code for Dr Balakrishnan's full speech.



Three ways our diplomatic capital helped us

We could bring Singaporeans home. In particular, we worked with partners such as Malaysia, France, and Israel and even countries where we had no embassies or ground presence, to bring Singaporeans home. Subsequently, we returned the favour, and helped to facilitate the return of nationals to their countries.

It ensured supply chain connectivity. Partners including Australia, Canada, Chile, New Zealand and ASEAN countries kept supplies flowing into Singapore despite closed borders. For example, the air freight connectivity partnership with New Zealand allowed food to be transported to us, and medical supplies to be sent from Singapore to New Zealand.

We secured vaccines early and minimised delays. We were able to use our networks to secure vaccines. Over the years, we have participated actively at multilateral forums like the United Nations, World Health Organisation and World Trade Organisation. It was this diplomatic capital we built up that aided us in securing vaccines.

Three risks to Singapore in the coming years

Rising global debt. COVID-19 has resulted in a doubling of global debt overhang. Singapore, being reliant on and playing a big role in the global economy, is susceptible, especially as the world transitions from short-term solutions that do not solve long-term problems caused by COVID-19.

Deepened fault lines. There are deepened fault lines globally and divisions between and within countries and society as a result of the economic impact of COVID-19. There is increased pressure on governments to adopt nationalistic, protectionist, and isolationist approaches.

Worsened US-China relations. Singapore has strong relationships with both US and China. For example, approximately 85% of the US' total investments in Southeast Asia (which total more than US\$338 billion) are in Singapore, while China is our largest trading partner. In the tug-of-war between US and China, Singapore must stand firm, and not be pressured into making decisions. Instead, we must base our actions on a consistent and principled foreign policy.

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Our unique selling point is not to be a vassal state or to be bought or intimidated or to be a pale imitation of a larger power, but to be ourselves - authentic, reliable, trustworthy, relevant, and useful.

– Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan on 1 Mar

[Sources: MFA & ST, 1 Mar]

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