

1. ADAPTING FOR THE POST COVID-19 WORLD



At the First Session of the Fourteenth Parliament on 24 Aug, President Halimah Yacob spoke about how in this time of change, Singapore must rethink its problems and evolve its social models and policies accordingly. Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also spoke (on 31 Aug and 2 Sep respectively) on the challenges and evolution Singapore has had to face to survive in the post-COVID-19 world. Here are the key points:

The Four Ways Singapore Must Evolve

- Adopt an integrated and coordinated approach to economic transformation.** Tripartism – the cooperation of the government, businesses and labour movement – has long been a source of strength for Singapore’s economy. This could be built on to include more stakeholders, as well as community groups and global partners, to create jobs and new entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Leave no one behind.** For the past 55 years, meritocracy has served Singapore well, but it will have to evolve as the country develops. Singapore’s idea of merit has to be broadened to recognise talents beyond academic results and give children from disadvantaged families a fair start in life. A strong social safety net will provide opportunities for all to improve their lives, and assurance for those who fall to bounce back. Social safety nets have to be designed to encourage and lift people up without resulting in over-dependence on the system.
- Seize new opportunities through innovation.** Bright spots can be found amid economic disruption. The Emerging Stronger Taskforce was established in May to identify and capitalise on new emerging trends, such as in environmental sustainability, smart commerce and supply chain digitalisation. These have the potential to create new growth markets and jobs for Singaporeans.

- **Find new ways to be a vital node to the world.** Singapore has been a successful international hub. However, in the post COVID-19 world, this position cannot be taken for granted. As a small city-state, it is essential for Singapore to remain open to the world, create new forms of connection and deepen our linkages to existing markets.

MINDEF/SAF IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

Just like how Singapore must evolve, so will MINDEF/SAF. On 27 Aug, MINDEF revealed its plans for the post-COVID-19 world:

- **Managing COVID-19.** To protect servicemen, COVID-19 safety measures such as testing regimes and surveillance will be continued. Operations and training will be adjusted and reviewed for the new normal. Support for national COVID-19 efforts will continue to be provided.
- **Upholding Singapore’s peace and sovereignty.** The next-generation SAF will utilise new technologies, such as autonomous and unmanned systems and big data, and will create an integrated cyber force. The NS journey will be revamped to provide a more meaningful and efficient experience, with better vocation and deployment matching. Engagements with Singaporeans will also be enhanced to strengthen collective commitment to Total Defence and support for NS.
- **Maintaining Singapore’s place in the world.** MINDEF will ensure that the values of openness, inclusivity, cooperation and respect for international law are upheld through dialogue and partnerships at multilateral platforms. We will also enhance bilateral defence cooperation with partners such as Malaysia, Indonesia, China and the US.

Values Singapore Must Maintain

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By embracing change with courage and confidence, we build our capacity to adapt. By staying true to our values, we strengthen our sense of common purpose. By working in close partnership, we advance as Singapore Together.”

– DPM Heng in his speech on 31 Aug

- **Multiculturalism.** In today’s world, social media has amplified contending voices and views, exposing Singaporeans to causes, attitudes and values that may not be relevant to our local context. Younger Singaporeans are more open to discussions, which is positive, but they will need to be **mindful about remaining respectful to avoid fracturing our social cohesion.**
- **Openness.** With the current economy, job competition from work pass holders has become a potentially divisive issue. However, the government’s aim is ultimately to create jobs and raise the standards of living for Singaporeans. The attraction of foreign talent and companies is with purpose – if good companies from other countries were to come to Singapore, they cannot be expected to hire only Singaporeans. But, as they become more established here, they in turn **create more openings and opportunities for Singaporeans.**

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We have always been a people open to the world, welcoming others who can add value to our society and bring the best out of us. This is our history and our ethos, from our beginnings as an open port and an immigrant nation.”

– PM Lee on 2 Sep

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Our Singapore identity has been formed and strengthened not by excluding those who arrive later, but by successive arrivals adding to the richness of our society.”

– President Halimah Yacob on 24 Aug

- **Unity.** The Singapore Bicentennial last year explored how Singapore progressed as a united people with the **conviction to defy the odds**. COVID-19 has seen this common purpose strengthened, with many who stepped up to help others. The Emerging Stronger Conversations has been convened for Singaporeans to reflect on their COVID-19 experience and discuss how to move forward as one. Through each past crisis, from the Separation to British withdrawal to economic storms, Singapore has **survived as a nation, each time stronger together**.

[Sources: The Istana & ST, 24 Aug; CNA, ST & PMO, 31 Aug; Gov.sg, 27 Aug; PMO, 2 Sep]

2. STAYING CONNECTED TO ASEAN AND THE WORLD

At the Singapore Summit on 14 Sep, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, emphasised that Singapore needs to do two things to remain competitive as a regional and global hub: **stay open** to trade, investment and people, and balance that openness by **providing enough opportunities** for Singaporeans. He highlighted four ways to achieve that balance:

- Provide opportunities to develop Singaporeans at every level by deepening their skills, or developing adjacent skills which would allow them to switch sectors flexibly.
- Encourage firms to anchor themselves in Singapore, and build international teams that include both Singaporeans and foreigners.
- Ensure fair hiring and promotion practices.
- Manage the number and diversity of foreigners, in order to continue attracting top-tier talent, while making sure Singaporeans in the middle- and lower-income levels will enjoy opportunities and fair competition.

SM Shanmugaratnam added that despite tensions between the US and China, he believed there is “enough space” for the world to continue building “win-win partnerships.” He made similar comments at the Standard Chartered ASEAN Business Forum 2020 on 25 Aug, where he noted that the global uncertainties of COVID-19 offered opportunities in ASEAN and Asia for Singapore’s growth. He shared two key conditions for harnessing these opportunities:

- Singapore must continue playing to its unique strength as a “hub” in the region, by acting as an intermediary between markets and helping to diversify risk for businesses. This **builds “win-win opportunities”** for Singapore and its partners in ASEAN and Asia.
- Regional **cooperation within ASEAN** is especially important as China moves upwards in the value chain. With ASEAN emerging as an important market of 600 million people and an increasingly competitive region for production, it is well suited to complement China’s economic development and integrate itself into evolving Asian supply chains.



At the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) on 8 Sep, Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin also emphasised the need for **greater cooperation within ASEAN** to tackle regional challenges such as cybersecurity and climate change. A collaborative approach based on trust and open communication is paramount in re-opening borders, reconstructing supply chain links, and restoring economic activity as countries move forward from the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gradually Re-opening Singapore’s Borders

On 24 Mar, Singapore shut its borders to tourists and short-term visitors as a temporary measure against the spread of COVID-19. This move pummelled our small, open economy.

On 19 May, the Ministry of Health announced that Singapore would work to reopen its borders gradually, starting with travel for business and official purposes. This began on 8 Jun with “fast lane” arrangements between Singapore and six Chinese provinces and municipalities, and as of 15 Sep this has expanded to five other countries in APAC.

These arrangements are complemented by public health safeguards, such as pre-departure and post-arrival COVID-19 swab tests, adherence to controlled itineraries, and the SafeTravel Pass, which enable a person sponsored by a company or organisation to enter Singapore.

For the latest information on travel arrangements, please visit: <https://safetravel.ica.gov.sg>.

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To survive, we have to keep our borders open. To thrive, we have to connect to the world. To prosper, we have to be a hub of the global economy.
 – Minister Ong Ye Kung
 on 14 Aug

[Sources: CNA, 21 May & 3 Jun; TODAY, 25 Aug & 15 Sep; ST, 22 Mar & 14, 18 Aug & 15 Sep; Parliament, 8 Sep]

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