

Report on Singapore Perspectives 2019: Singapore.World
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Singapore Perspectives 2019 focused on the challenges posed by intensifying competition between the United States (US) and China, technological disruptions to the global economy, opportunities in Southeast Asia as one of the biggest and fast-growing regions, and the importance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to Singapore's foreign policy, particularly as a tool to manage regional tensions.

The annual flagship conference of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Singapore Perspectives 2019 saw discussions on recent geopolitical developments, their trajectory over the coming years and their implications for Singapore and the region. It featured presentations by three panels of distinguished speakers, and a dialogue with Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan.



Themed "Singapore.World", this year's Singapore Perspectives conference gathered 1,200 members from the policy-making and business communities, academia, students and civil society.

Panel I: Singapore and the World

Chairperson	
<p>Professor Tommy Koh Professor of Law, National University of Singapore and Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs</p>	
Speakers	
<p>Professor Wang Gungwu Chairman, Board of Trustees, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute</p>	<p>George Yeo Visiting Scholar, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and Former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Singapore (2004–2011)</p>

There are now millions of settlers of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia who are loyal to their respective nation-states ... if China hopes that these nationals of Chinese descent would play a positive role in their countries' relations with China, it would have to exercise sensitivity to their local interests as well as the interests of the countries where they have made their homes.

— Professor Wang Gungwu

We have to immerse ourselves in China much more in order to understand its nature ... the more we understand China, the more useful we are, not only to China, but to the ASEAN and the US.

— George Yeo

Panel I discussed recent geopolitical developments, in particular China's rise and the US' response, as well as that of the rest of the world.

Prof. Koh began by outlining key developments in the world in 2018. He noted that Singapore had increased its standing in the world by successfully hosting the Trump-Kim Summit and chairing ASEAN.

An important development was the increasingly volatile relationship between the US and China, and he invited the two speakers to comment on US-China relations and the question of whether a war between these two countries is inevitable.

He also cautioned participants against dismissing other developments elsewhere in the world, such as the conflict between the Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East and the growing populist movements against multilateralism, globalisation and free trade. In particular, multilateralism is at risk, said Prof. Koh:

The world has grown increasingly inter-dependent and inter-connected. Trade, travel, technology and globalisation have changed forever the nature of the world we live in. Some of our most important challenges — such as global warming and climate change, the mass extinction of the species, the warming and acidification of our oceans, terrorism, mass migration — can only be solved through international cooperation and multilateral institutions. In parts of the West, we have witnessed the rise of right-wing populists who emphasise nationalism and denounce so-called globalism. They wish to destroy the multilateral institutions, such as, the WTO, UNESCO, etc. We must not allow these right-wing populists to prevail in this fight. At the same time, we must not allow the growing inequality in our societies to produce the phenomenon of the “angry voters”.

Through historical analysis, Prof. Wang gave his insights on the dynamics between China and the Southeast Asian region by examining how China had interacted with the states to its south in the past. Since the Mongolian invasion of China, political power over the country has been held in the areas north of the Yellow River. To survive, those who objected to the rule of the invaders and moved to the south had begun trading, often against imperial edicts, with foreign merchants at the various ports along the coasts of the South China Sea.

With an unprecedented openness of its southern markets in recent times, exemplified by the One Belt One Road initiative, there are even more opportunities for China to engage with its Southeast Asian neighbours, making it more important than ever for China to protect its national interests in this area. ASEAN members need to remain united so as to safeguard their respective and collective interests against great power rivalries.



Professor Wang Gungwu (left) speaking with a student from Eunoia Junior College.

Mr Yeo elaborated on China's history, the nature of its worldview, its development in recent years, and the world's response to its rise. Competition between the US and China is likely to continue for at least another 20 years, though talks to resolve the current trade war are likely to succeed because China will “go 80 per cent of the way to meet US demands.” This is “not because they are afraid or generous, but because they know time is on their side,” said Mr Yeo.

He also spoke on ASEAN's role in regional geopolitics, and the importance of ASEAN to Singapore.

“It is enlightened self-interest, as to why Singapore puts ASEAN at the centre of its foreign policy,” said Mr Yeo, calling on Indonesia to take a stronger leadership role, as it would be difficult for ASEAN to coalesce around a common position otherwise.

Apart from external developments, Singapore has always possessed a “huge cultural genome” to embrace, adapt and thrive in the geopolitical landscape, said Mr Yeo. He pointed to Singapore’s cultural diversity as a tremendous factor in its own rise as a city-state. With other ASEAN member states having large communities here, Singapore needs to nurture its diversity and inclusiveness, remain internally cohesive, and continue to learn from others and grow, and Singaporeans need to open their minds and hearts to others.



From left: Mr George Yeo, Professor Tommy Koh and Professor Wang Gungwu — speakers and chairperson for Panel I.

Panel II: Singapore and International Economics

Chairperson	
Gabriel Lim Permanent Secretary Ministry of Communications and Information	
Speakers	
Chng Kai Fong Managing Director Economic Development Board	Lee Chee Koon President & Group Chief Executive Officer CapitaLand Limited

We need to get to know ASEAN better because that's how we're going to make our living, by facilitating the connections in ASEAN.

— Chng Kai Fong

Globalisation is par for the course if we truly want to become a significant player ... there is no way we can teach hunger. But what we can do is to encourage Singaporeans to keep a competitive mindset; to be prepared to venture out of the comfort zone, to take the road less travelled, and to learn to manage uncertainty.

— Lee Chee Koon

Panel II discussed the global economy, and how Singapore and Singaporeans need to build on their strengths and reinvent themselves to thrive in the new environment.

Singaporeans need to better understand ASEAN and seize opportunities arising from digital technologies, emphasised Mr Chng. "We need to get to know ASEAN better because that's how we're going to make our living – by facilitating the connections in ASEAN."

Instead of familiar destinations such as London, New York, Tokyo or Shanghai, Singaporeans need to look to top regional cities like Jakarta and Ho Chi Minh City when they go abroad for student-exchange programmes and internships.



Mr Chng Kai Fong raised the example of Ngee Ann Polytechnic, which sends 70 students to intern in ASEAN countries such as Jakarta, Ho Chi Minh City or Bangkok as part of its Global Entrepreneurial Internship Programme.

From the private sector's perspective, Mr Lee suggested that Singapore has strengths that still serve to attract companies and global talent, amidst a deteriorating international order. With countries beset by political conflict and economic dislocation, leading to government shutdowns and trade wars, Singapore has much to offer to companies and individuals seeking "stability, protection and trust."

For Singapore companies seeking to globalise, they face significant challenges in overseas markets, including legal and market barriers, and need to better understand the business environments overseas, find their niche and stay competitive. Where possible, Singapore companies also need to work together as they venture overseas, the way the Koreans, Japanese and Taiwanese are known to do. This is especially because Singapore companies are competing with global players that are bigger by several orders of magnitude.

There also needs to be greater cooperation between small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and multinational corporations (MNCs), particularly in the circulation of talent. For instance, talents moving from MNCs to SMEs could provide management expertise and drive innovation programmes, helping SMEs to grow and expand.

Individuals themselves need to be more connected globally, said Mr Lee, and he exhorted Singaporeans to challenge themselves to take up overseas postings that may be less business-friendly and devoid of the amenities offered in developed countries.

He commended younger Singaporeans for venturing into start-ups despite their high risks of failure, as the experience allows them to be exposed to and learn from failures.



Mr Lee Chee Koon cited a regional company's chief executive who declared that he had given up hiring Singaporeans as management trainees, opting instead for Malaysians who were less demanding on pay, yet more prepared to take on difficult assignments in challenging environments such as Africa and South America.

Panel III: Singapore and the Region

Chairperson	
Professor Chan Heng Chee Ambassador-at-Large Ministry of Foreign Affairs	
Speakers	
Bilahari Kausikan Chairman, Middle East Institute National University of Singapore	Dr Marty Natalegawa Member, Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation, United Nations and Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia (2009–2014)

Now, we all have pluralistic political systems and there are many advantages to that, but the imperatives on ASEAN leaders are entirely different. Sometimes, it's not that they don't know what to do, it's just that they don't know how to do it and get elected again."

— Bilahari Kausikan

In the 21st century, the nature of power itself has changed. The currency of power is no longer, for instance, military or economic in the traditional sense We should not be too occupied with looking at quantitative, measurable capacities, but we must apply our capacity to deciphering intent – this is where diplomacy becomes extremely important."

— Dr Marty Natalegawa

In the third panel, the speakers considered Singapore's role in ASEAN, ASEAN's position in broader international relations, and how to ensure the continued relevance and close cooperation of states in the region.

Mr Kausikan pointed to Singapore's unique position in Southeast Asia, commenting that although it is geographically situated in the region, it is not and cannot always be considered a part of it, unlike other constituent nations. Three unique characteristics were raised to support this point — the ethnic Chinese majority, the model of multiracial meritocracy which has been integral to the nation since independence, and Singapore's status as a small city-state with no natural hinterland.

The first two traits have historically bred suspicion among Singapore's neighbours, though this has been somewhat mitigated recently by a greater acknowledgement of China's key role in regional geopolitics. The last trait makes it imperative for Singapore to always look beyond Southeast Asia to make a living and protect itself, as well as leverage its differences to stand out. He concluded that despite these differences, Singapore's distinct identity as perceived

both from within and without cannot be taken for granted. Instead, it needs to be consciously and continuously developed. Furthermore, while ASEAN is a vital and irreplaceable means of managing regional tensions, it is but one of many tools for Singapore, rather than a panacea with which to tackle regional and global ills.

Dr Natalegawa began with three key observations. First, convergence between local, national, regional and global phenomena is becoming the norm, as observed in the Arab Spring and its implications. Second, acknowledgement that the economic, political and social realms, which are commonly perceived distinctly, are in fact inseparable is necessary to understand global issues holistically. Third, change and uncertainty are inevitable, but a difference needs to be recognised between inevitable uncertainty and a “state of drift” which comes about from shortfalls in policy-making.



Dr Marty Natalegawa (right), with fellow speaker Mr Bilahari Kausikan (left) and panel chairperson Professor Chan Heng Chee (centre).

He moved on to argue that despite the aforementioned convergence, the world is becoming more divided, and nations are less willing to resolve tensions through diplomacy. Hence, Southeast Asia needs a way of understanding global geopolitical tensions more coherently, because these have the potential to upset regional unity, and this involves broadening horizons to identify other important bilateral relationships beyond the US-China dynamic that affect this region. In order to achieve this, ASEAN needs to actively assert its relevance to both member states and the global community. It has thus far been commendable in promoting principles of neutrality, resilience and centrality through efforts such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum and so on.

ASEAN countries also need to develop instruments to deal with bilateral episodes other than those between the US and China, such as those between the US and Russia, China and Japan, and India and China.

Both Dr Natalegawa and Mr Kausikan agreed that acting in a nation's sovereign interests and commitments to ASEAN should not be seen as necessarily contradictory. Dr Natalegawa raised the example of Indonesia continuing to prioritise close regional cooperation during its period of political transition at the turn of the century, as it was complementary to internal stability.

With regard to obstacles to ASEAN's assertion of continued relevance to the international community, Mr Kausikan pointed out that the combination of external threats posed by the Cold War and the authoritarian regimes — which constituted the founding members of ASEAN in 1967, made it easier to pursue collective interests as there were less complex political imperatives to consider. On community-building in ASEAN, Dr Natalegawa stressed the importance of developing a sense of ownership among the populace and urged civil society and citizens to step up to the plate rather than rely on initiatives from the respective governments. On the other hand, he emphasised that the leaders in the region should proactively contribute to broader international politics. Crisis response capacities within ASEAN should be developed to be more time-sensitive rather than waiting for regular summits to address pressing geopolitical issues.



Students from Temasek Polytechnic listening intently to the discussion.

Dialogue with Dr Vivian Balakrishnan

Chairperson
Janadas Devan Director Institute of Policy Studies
Speaker
Dr Vivian Balakrishnan Minister for Foreign Affairs

We are witnessing a Fractured World Order, due to Fractious Domestic Politics, that is caused by a Digital Disruption. This is a chain of causality.

— Dr Vivian Balakrishnan

In his presentation, Dr Balakrishnan argued that technology is a driver of national and international politics. By causing revolutionary shifts in the economic means of production, technological change disrupts society and politics, increasing the polarisation within societies and between countries, and shifting the global balance of power.

The world is now witnessing dramatic advancements in the field of robotics, big data, machine learning, artificial intelligence and 5G technologies, which have revolutionised many industries including finance, defence and health. These developments have been accompanied by the consolidation of global markets.

Against the backdrop of disruptions in the international system, he argued that Singapore must first, remain open and connected, “[strengthening] our air, sea and digital connectivity, deepening our economic and investment links with partners across the globe”; second, continue to strengthen and contribute actively to shaping and promoting multilateralism; and third, extend and diversify our partnerships, including and beyond our links to ASEAN cities.

During the dialogue, Dr Balakrishnan responded to questions on topics such as Singapore’s cybersecurity and how to equip the next generation with relevant skills in the face of today’s digital revolution. He also commented on the differences between ASEAN and the European Union (EU), describing both as “the two most successful regional organisations”. The minister also responded to questions about the growing grey area between commercial entities and states, and the maintenance of domestic consensus on Singapore’s national interest and foreign policy.

“Based on my experience so far, there has been no gap, no party politics has supervened or interfered with our pursuit of foreign policy,” said Dr Balakrishnan. He said that the Cabinet spends much time working through the options, before he would brief other parliamentarians, including those from opposition parties, about the next course of action.

“Certainly with the current Opposition, they have played their part, and we have taken them into confidence.”

He highlighted the need to “engage in a principled, neutral, disciplined way,” which is key to convincing stakeholders both at home and abroad to support Singapore’s actions on a global stage. He expressed optimism for Singapore’s future in the face of uncertainty, if Singaporeans master the necessary technological skills, and the government attracts companies to “do real development work” in Singapore, by investing in infrastructure and “[creating] systems that protect intellectual property.”



Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan (left) responded to a variety of questions, ranging from Singapore’s foreign policy and cybersecurity, to how Singaporeans may be equipped to deal with the digital revolution.

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