

**Singapore Perspectives Conference 2022: City  
(Pre-Conference Session) Cities, Civilisations and Geopolitics: In  
Conversation with George Yeo and Liu Thai Ker**

By Sufia Maisarah



*Caption for photo: Mr George Yeo (left), Dr Liu Thai Ker (centre) & Ambassador Chan Heng Chee at NUS Shaw Alumni Foundation House*

The Singapore Perspectives pre-conference session on 11 January featured former Foreign Minister Mr George Yeo and Dr Liu Thai Ker, former chief executive officer of the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), and current Chairman of Morrow Architects & Planners. It was moderated by Ambassador Chan Heng Chee, Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Professor of Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Design.

### **Opening Remarks**

Ambassador Chan Heng Chee began the session by looking back in history. She noted how the word “city” evokes one’s imagination and is linked to the great civilisations of the past and the busy metropolises of today. She mentioned that cities are important actors in politics and some think cities are moving faster than the state. Next, she asked the speakers to share their views on the role of cities today and how the latter could rise or fail.

### **Discussion**

Mr George Yeo started off by acknowledging the different functions of cities throughout time, which include political, administrative, religious and cultural centres. He then shared his view

of cities as nodes in a neural network. The wider the network, the richer it becomes and gives rise to opportunities of generating ideas and attracting talent. He also mentioned that despite the availability of the internet and the instant connections it provides, face-to-face connectivity will always remain paramount. He proceeded to describe the importance of trust and the ability to negotiate among cities. Mr Yeo said that when members of a tribe feel respected, they bring along not only their brains and expertise but also their own networks. This is then tied to the fact that Singapore is a centre where different networks of people from all around the world intersect; and it is crucial to negotiate and deal according to the familiarity and customs of different people.

When questioned about the future of Singapore in the next 10 to 20 years, Mr Yeo said it is important for Singapore to reconnect with ASEAN. He stated that Singapore was more familiar with America and Japan than with nearby countries. He did not think this was sustainable; it would be best to reconnect with the region in case of any future uncertainties. Mr Yeo mentioned one of the biggest uncertainties that could affect Singapore in the decades to come was the tension between the US and China. Rediscovering Singapore's neighbours is akin to rediscovering our local neighbourhood, he said, which should have been done from the very beginning and was now impacted by restricted travel during the pandemic. He concluded by emphasising the importance of good leadership that Singapore would need to carry it into the future.

Dr Liu Thai Ker shared his experiences in urban planning during the early days of Singapore's independence and reflected on the remarkable transformation that had taken place since then. Despite being widely celebrated as the "father of urban planning", Dr Liu said credit should go to Singapore's first generation of political leaders — as the driving force behind the transformation of a poor backward city into an affluent global city. He attributed this success to the attitudes of these leaders, as they chose to make pragmatic and practical choices over chasing iconic flashy buildings in early urban planning. He noted that it was with good legislation, hard work and fair policies — not just pure luck or merely good intentions — that improved infrastructure here and liveability for the people. The good choices and regulations eventually made Singapore into a garden city that was attractive to foreign talents and investments. Dr Liu also emphasised that cities could possibly fail if iconic structures were prioritised instead of practical solutions and designs.

He then moved to the issue of Singapore's progress. Although Singapore developed extremely quickly over the past decades, he expressed his worry that Singapore's position as an affluent city could lead to future generations being complacent — particularly of the potential speed of larger Asian powers in development and progress. Singapore could reach a point where it could no longer keep up with other fast-developing powers, he said. He also said that the future generation would need to sustain and refine the crisis mentality that the first generation of leaders had — in order to stay ahead or at least keep in pace with its larger neighbours.

### **Question & Answer**

A Q&A session was held with questions from the audience. Mr Yeo was asked how Singapore as a city-state would continue to thrive in the context of conflicting spheres-of-influence between China and the US. Would we have to compromise on our sovereignty? He replied that people would have to define what it meant to become Singaporean, and this hopefully

would mean that one becomes bigger and more understanding in accepting the differences amongst ourselves. This, he noted, would make becoming Singaporean more attractive for people to accept.

Dr Liu was asked how cities could better prepare for the impact of climate change on their growth and future prosperity, particularly for an island city-state like Singapore in the face of potential rising sea levels. He answered that there were two main areas, the first being the protection of big ecologies in which tiny Singapore had done as much as it could; the second was the burning of fossil fuels in which Singapore has tried to reduce by ensuring an excellent bus and train system and avoiding severe traffic jams, which are not only inconveniences but also burn up energy.

Many cities focus on certain areas (cultural hub, financial hub, transport hub). As a city-state, what does Singapore need to be and where should it focus on to be globally competitive? Mr Yeo said Singapore's economy is at heart arbitrage. Therefore, it is important to understand different markets and domains in order to maintain economic competitiveness.

The speakers were also asked about the push for more self-sustaining food supplies and how city planning can enable this. Dr Liu said that growing some vegetables in Singapore is a good move, but it would be difficult to be completely self-sustaining. Mr Yeo also noted the importance of local production, but Singapore cannot be completely self-sustaining given the complex division of labour globally.

The next question was from Ambassador Chan on the possibility of city diplomacy having a real place and being able to push things much faster than the sovereign state, to which Mr Yeo replied that due to the Westphalian system of nations, cities and states have to work within national policies. He gave examples of Singapore's good autonomous relations with the states of neighbouring countries, which came with the blessings of the capitals.

The next question asked if Singapore was becoming overcrowded, and about the issue of reclaiming land and balancing between nature and development. Dr Liu answered that for Singapore to stand economically on par with surrounding countries, a population growth is to be expected, with the possibility of reaching 10 million within the next century. Mr Yeo sympathised with Dr Liu's view and stated that it would be better to plan for more; if Singapore does not reach those high numbers, it would still be spacious.

The final question from the audience was on slogans. If we were to design a slogan for Singapore now, what would it be? Mr Yeo said this question would require more thought than a casual remark while Dr Liu said that if a slogan were to be designed it would be important that it is action-oriented and useful as a city-wide concept. Ambassador Chan concluded the session and thanked the speakers for sharing their views.

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