

Beyond 50 Years: The Next Lap for Singapore

The Institute of Policy Studies and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) of the National University of Singapore (NUS) organised the [Singapore at 50: What Lies Ahead? \(SG50+\) Conference](#) earlier this month. Some 640 participants, comprising business and community leaders, policymakers, academics and students, attended the event at the Shangri-La Hotel on 2 and 3 July 2015. Planning for the conference began a year ago. It was conceptualised to take a long-range look at the major drivers of Singapore's future and how Singaporeans can prepare themselves for a more volatile and uncertain world. Just under a third of the participants submitted feedback on the conference — while many found the sessions thought-provoking and insightful, they suggested that for future conferences, more time should be allocated for questions from the floor and younger participants should be invited to ask questions. Here is a summary of the event. The full conference report is available [here](#).

The SG50+ Conference began with an opening dinner on 2 July. In his welcome address, NUS President Tan Chorh Chuan described the event as a timely platform to consider how past policy approaches in Singapore should and must be examined to deal with a more complex and unpredictable future. He added that he hoped that insights and ideas generated over the two days could contribute to Singapore's thinking about being future-ready, so that the next 50 years would be just as “productive, successful and uplifting” as the past.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was the guest-of-honour at a [post-dinner dialogue](#) on 2 July, which was moderated by CNN host and *Washington Post* columnist Dr Fareed Zakaria. The PM spoke candidly about how racial and religious harmony could not be taken for granted in an increasingly-diverse Singapore, and gamely responded to Dr Zakaria's questions about leadership succession and the evolving political climate.

Governance in a Changing, More Diverse Singapore

On maintaining racial and religious harmony, Mr Lee noted that Singaporeans had become more religious and more conscious of their identity. Society still has “lines which are very clearly drawn,” he pointed out. “Unless you make a very strong effort to overlap them, to work across them, to integrate... they can always render you asunder,” he said.

On Dr Zakaria's suggestion that Singapore had not transitioned — like other developed economies had — to a multi-party liberal democracy, Mr Lee responded: “We are a multi-

party liberal democratic system, the outcome is not what you would like to see, but that's what Singaporean voters have decided."

Mr Lee added that Singaporeans had benefited from the system but it was not clear whether it would prevail for the next 50 years. However, for as long as possible, Singapore should maintain a system where the majority supports a "good government... which will develop policies which will help most Singaporeans," he said.

The discussion then turned to whether the government's efforts to instil a "culture of respect", as Dr Zakaria put it, was antithetical to the creativity and innovation that Singapore needed for its economic future. Mr Lee said it was important to have a balance. "We want people who stand up. We don't want people who scrape and bow." Quoting the United States President who drafted America's Declaration of Independence in 1776, Thomas Jefferson, Mr Lee added that there had to be a "[certain natural aristocracy](#)" in the system, where those who had earned respect for their virtues and merits were accorded that respect.

Dr Zakaria then asked: "Could it be that Singapore is too paranoid about anarchy and that fear will not develop innovation?" To that, the Prime Minister said that Singapore is not as "orderly" as outsiders think. Neither would anarchy lead to brilliance, he said. However, he acknowledged that politics in Singapore would change in tune with the aspirations of younger generations of Singaporeans. They would have to find their own leaders to lead them and the country.

A New Generation of Leaders in the Wings

Asked by a member of the audience if he would stay on as Prime Minister for another 10 years, Mr Lee said he would strongly prefer not to. The job required someone younger who could connect with younger generations, he said.

[\(Watch PM Lee's dialogue with Fareed Zakaria\)](#)

Mr Lee's views were echoed by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam at a lunch dialogue moderated by Dr Zakaria the next day. Dr Zakaria's question — one which he quipped "no one else will ask" — was whether Singapore would one day have an Indian as Prime Minister. Mr Tharman, who is also Finance Minister, said it was "only a matter of time" before someone from an ethnic minority (Indian, Malay or Eurasian) would take the seat. But he was not keen on the job, he stressed. There are "a crop of people who are in the fray and entering the fray who will provide future leadership," he said.

On Dr Zakaria's question on whether there was an "advantage to having a one-party state", Mr Tharman said Singapore was not a one-party state as the PAP was subjected to "serious competition" in the political system. But what about the PAP's dominance in Parliament, asked Dr Zakaria, referring to the 79 of 87 seats held by the PAP (with one seat left vacant after Mr Lee Kuan Yew's death in March 2015). "That's outcome, not design," Mr Tharman countered, to a round of applause from the audience. He went on to explain how the Singapore government remains accountable to the electorate.

[\(Watch DPM Tharman's dialogue with Fareed Zakaria\)](#)

Later that day during Session 4 of the conference, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong spoke of the conundrum that democracies face in producing stable, good government. The ballot box tradition, he said, has had “more misses than hits in picking the best leaders.” As to whether Singapore would continue to have good governance, ESM Goh, who is also IPS’ Patron, cited two challenges to this: Higher expectations and changing aspirations in society, and the impact of technology and social media.

Former UK Prime Minister Sir John Major, who also spoke at Session 4, weighed in on social media’s impact on politics. The public is increasingly tuned in to political controversies rather than longer-term issues that matter to their lives. A good leadership which “speaks above the clamour” to set out its long-term vision and goals will improve the quality of policymaking and engagement, said Sir John. On Singapore’s future, he said he believed that Singapore’s drive to leverage every opportunity to remain ahead of the curve would ensure that it continues to be successful.

[\(Watch Session 4\)](#)

GEOPOLITICS, THE ECONOMY AND THE CITY

Sessions 1 to 3 of the conference on 3 July focused on emerging trends and possible responses to a more complex geopolitical environment, an economy facing technological changes and a more challenging living environment.

US-China Relations will Dominate Regional Geopolitics

[\(Watch Session 1\)](#)

Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee chaired Session 1 on Geopolitics. Professor Jia Qingguo, Dean of Peking University’s School of International Studies, pointed out that although China had overtaken the United States in terms of gross domestic product, the latter’s lead in political influence, economic efficiency, scientific innovation and military capability is likely to remain significant for a long time.

Prof. Jia also spoke of China’s “dual identities” — it was simultaneously a developing and developed country, for instance — which had resulted in it having dual interests. This had given rise to seeming inconsistencies in its actions, he said, but “all countries concerned need to resist the temptation to jump to quick conclusions about each other’s intentions and take emotional measures against each other.”

Ambassador-at-Large and Policy Adviser of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bilahari Kausikan spoke about how Singapore could continue to thrive in the region. A better understanding of the political dynamics between Washington and Beijing would give Singapore a more nimble and nuanced stance to pursue its interests. The centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the region should be maintained, he said.

“The challenge for Singapore, as for all other countries in East Asia, is to position ourselves so as to preserve maximum autonomy and avoid being forced into invidious choices,” he said. Potential threats to Singapore’s nimbleness in foreign policy include partisan domestic

politics, a civil society susceptible to foreign interference, and a weak and inefficient civil service and public security forces, he said.

An Ecosystem for Innovation and Creativity

[\(Watch Session 2\)](#)

Professor Tommy Koh, Ambassador-at-Large and IPS Special Adviser chaired Session 2 on the Economy. Dr Byron Auguste, Managing Director of Opportunity@Work, a civic enterprise to help Americans thrive in the workplace, cited three ways in which advanced economies could continue being prosperous: productivity through innovation, participation in meaningful work, and sharing in the rewards of one's labour.

Dr Auguste, the former Deputy Assistant to US President Barack Obama for Economic Policy and Deputy Director of the National Economic Council added that Singapore should invest more in encouraging organic creativity. "Human talent is the most under-used resource on earth," and technology can play an important role in accelerating learning and optimising human capital potential, he added.

Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore Ravi Menon agreed that Singapore needs an ecosystem for innovation to remain competitive. However, the consequences of failure are higher in Singapore, in part because of higher expectations and the local culture of obligation to family and society. At the same time, the government cannot always be relied on to provide safety nets, as this would inhibit entrepreneurial risk-taking, creativity and innovation.

A sustainable future economy must be able to provide opportunities for economic and social mobility, through early childhood education, lifelong learning, transfers to low-income households and taxation and voluntarism, said Mr Menon. Encouraging community support is an important aspect of the Singapore social compact, which has often been misunderstood as a relationship between citizens and the government, when it should really be between those who have done well and those who have fallen behind.

New Energy and Intelligent Planning

[\(Watch Session 3\)](#)

In Session 3 on The City, chaired by United Nations Under-Secretary-General Noeleen Heyzer, futurist and business strategist Peter Schwartz called on Singapore to consider nuclear energy if it wants to seriously address climate change and cut carbon emissions. Mr Schwartz, who also sits on Singapore's Research, Innovation and Enterprise Council, outlined three options: position nuclear power plants on offshore barges, build an underground plant, or collaborate with neighbours to build one on a neighbouring island.

Dr Liu Thai Ker, founding Chairman of the Centre for Liveable Cities and former chief planner of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, spoke of how "intelligent planning" was crucial for Singapore to house its future population, which may rise to 10 million in 50 years. This meant that a city's objectives, its inhabitants' needs and the physical constraints should

inform urban planning, he said. He cautioned against blind faith in technology, as it can enhance but never replace good design.

In his closing remarks, LKYSPP Dean Kishore Mahbubani billed the event as a “remarkable festival of ideas” that had brought together leading global minds to reflect on how Singapore has advanced in the 50 years since Independence, and how the nation can continue to thrive. While there are no definitive answers to the questions of our time, we need to keep asking the right questions, said Professor Mahbubani.

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