



SMC 2019

# **Singapore Model Cabinet**

**(The Future of Singapore - 4G Leadership)**

First Topic

**Leading the Change in Singapore's Domestic Affairs**

Second Topic

**Defining Singapore's Foreign Policy in an Uncertain World**

# Leading the Change in Singapore's Domestic Affairs

## Introduction

Ever since its founding, Singapore has prided herself on being a land of meritocracy, where people can achieve their goals, regardless of their background. The principle of meritocracy is, of course, rooted in the concept of merit, where everyone is allowed the opportunity to succeed based on the same tests, and the most talented are selected based on these non-discriminatory challenges ("Meritocracy in Singapore: Solution or problem?", 2018). However, a system of allocating rewards via competitions and incentive structures undoubtedly has potential for exploitation (Kuah, 2018). Clearly, those who are advantaged in the terms of education or natural ability will thrive in such a system. This system seemed to have worked well in the past. However, in today's context, when the divide between the rich and poor in Singapore is growing, there are undoubtedly people who have been left behind. ("Strong Performers", 2010). People now question if meritocracy still works in today's context, where the rich are able to exploit every resource available to them to get ahead while the poor are left to flounder.

In this situation, one key question is whether more financial assistance should be provided by the Singapore Government in order to level the playing field, or whether the current measures are adequate. Some even feel that less aid should be given to cultivate a mindset of taking responsibility for oneself in Singapore. The 4G leadership will have to decide how it wishes to shape Singaporean society in the next decade to achieve the best outcome for Singapore.

## Historical overview

### Lee Kuan Yew (5 June 1959 - 28 November 1990)

The first Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew has long been praised as the founding father of independent Singapore, leading Singapore through some of its darkest days. Under his leadership, Singapore prioritised a strong substance-over-form method of leadership, whereby the ends justifies the means (Lee, 2000). While deemed necessary at the time, there are those who consider his actions to be excessive and authoritarian in nature, with his rule often being considered a “benevolent dictatorship”<sup>1</sup> (Watson, 2016), and him, a “political pragmatist” (Popham, 2015). While unable to deny his contributions to the country, some argue that the principle of meritocracy favoured by Lee may not be beneficial in the long run (Riegel, 2000) as there would invariably be those left behind. In defense of Lee’s policies, after an article titled ‘The Stingy Nanny’<sup>2</sup> published in The Economist critiqued Singapore’s unusually harsh stance on government assistance, the High Commissioner of Singapore responded with this statement: Singapore “[having] no hinterland or natural resources of our own to fall back on, and our future depends on being a dynamic and self-reliant people who strive our utmost to excel and create wealth for ourselves, our families and our society” (Eng, 2010). Under Lee, the government took the stance that it did not have enough resources to provide for the needy indefinitely. The need for self-reliance and reliance on one’s own family was thus emphasised.

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<sup>1</sup> A form of government in which an authoritarian leader exercises political power for the benefit of the whole population instead of exclusively for themselves. A benevolent dictator may allow for some democratic decision-making to exist still.

<sup>2</sup> The Stingy Nanny - <https://www.economist.com/asia/2010/02/13/the-stingy-nanny>

## **Goh Chok Tong (28 November 1990 - 12 August 2004)**

Stressing continuity throughout his rule, Goh Chok Tong made it clear at the same time that he would be adopting a different style of leadership from that of his predecessor. His style of governance would later be described as consultative and consensual, and more open to public input (Welsh, 2010). This can be seen in how the Feedback Unit in March 1985 was set up to collect public opinion on different policies, suggesting that the government, during his tenure as Prime Minister, was becoming more consultative. He also included the introduction of the Fresh Start Housing Scheme for divorced or widowed individuals with dependent children to help those in difficult situations. He noted that meritocracy was beneficial, so long as Singapore remained aware of the risks of elitism (Goh, 2018), showing how we have to be aware of what we may take for granted. Great strides were made to assist the needy, including the Home Ownership Plus Education (HOME) scheme, which aimed to help young couples who chose to keep their families small to better focus on improving the quality of their and their children's lives through monetary incentives in exchange for parents attending skills-upgrading courses.

## **Lee Hsien Loong (12 August 2004 - Present)**

Lee Hsien Loong has continued the previous government's work of gathering feedback from the public and improving the people's quality of life. Having been the one to initiate a five-day work week and to implement the current standard of a four-month maternity-leave period ("Maternity leave in special situations", 2018), Lee's government was observed as catering more to public needs than ever before. It has been called the most populist of all governmental leaders thus far, especially with new government assistance

schemes targeting the most disadvantaged groups in Singapore (Heng, 2016). For example, there was the introduction of the Progressive Wage Model and Community Health Assistance Scheme (CHAS) in 2012, alongside the SkillsFuture scheme in 2015. These schemes were structured in such a way as to ensure that some responsibility almost always remained partially borne by the individual (Soo, 2017). All these were aimed at helping Singaporeans remain competitive in the job market, without forcing them to bear the burden of cost. Under Lee, a lot more financial and social assistance has been provided for needy Singaporeans.

## **Government Assistance in Singapore**

The sufficiency of public assistance in Singapore is a contentious topic. The Singapore Government has always advocated self-reliance and broad familial and community responsibility with regard to social support. Yet, it has recognised that it needs to provide more assistance to some Singaporeans in light of the growing wealth gap in society, according to Professor Alfred Muluan Wu of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Spending on social development has increased nearly three-fold in the last ten years or so, from about S\$12.7 billion in 2006 to an estimated S\$32 billion in 2016 (“Social Welfare: Are We Missing The Point?”, 2018). There are mainly three schools of thought on this subject. The first is that more assistance is needed to help close the financial divide between the rich and poor in Singapore today, especially with the rising income gap in society. The second is that the Singapore Government is doing more than enough and citizens should learn to be self-sufficient. Lastly, some also argue that no major

changes are necessary, that the direction we have been taking for the past few years is correct.

## **Should More Government Assistance be Provided?**

The first idea that Singapore should provide more aid to the disadvantaged comes from the school of thought that even though Singapore has progressed, the weakest of its citizens have been left behind with insufficient financial aid. People who argue for greater government assistance believe that the most needy within any society are the most disadvantaged during a nation's race to modernise. For example, it has been observed that the children of lower-income households generally fall behind those from wealthier households throughout school (Teng, 2016). This has given rise to worries of parentocracy, where parents with more financial capabilities are able to afford better opportunities for their children. One example of this would be Direct School Admissions (DSA). Initially meant to allow students who were talented in non-academic fields early placement in secondary schools, DSA has now been dominated by children of eager parents who are able to best prepare them for even these supposedly less competitive means of placement by investing heavily in enrichment classes (Ong, 2014). Thus, the parents able to afford the best resources are best able to help give their children a head start, while those without such means are left with few alternatives to secure the education of their choice.

In fact, a study in 2016 showed that 53.5% of secondary students in IP (Integrated Programme) secondary schools are from families with at least one university graduate

compared with only 17% in regular government schools (Teng, 2016). Similarly, almost 41% of the students in IP schools come from families with a monthly household income of more than S\$10,000, as compared to only 7% of students in regular government schools. While this is not to suggest that IP schools are necessarily superior to government schools, there is definitely the perception that they are deemed 'elite' schools in Singapore as a higher PSLE score is needed to gain entrance into them. This suggests that students of a lower socio-economic status in Singapore may not be performing as well at national examinations compared to students of a higher socio-economic status, especially since entrance into secondary schools is largely by merit. This may lead to social stratification and the perpetuation of class differences in schools (Teng, 2016). These are not beneficial for Singapore as it may lead to resentment and the weakening of our social fabric over time.

Furthermore, there have been concerns raised that Singapore's Gini Coefficient of 0.458 in 2017 was one of the highest in the developed world (Goy, 2017). According to then Social and Family Development Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, this is cause for concern as some children from poor families find it hard to break out of the poverty trap. In an interview, he noted that intergenerational poverty still occurred in Singapore, and that early intervention was needed to help children from these families achieve better outcomes (Goy, 2017). Given that people are a valuable resource in Singapore, some feel that there is a need to provide more assistance to ensure that every child can reach his or her full potential.

Consequently, there have been calls for the Government to provide more resources to aid the disenfranchised, now that we have the resources to do so, including plans to provide free meals, bursary amounts and raising income ceilings for financial assistance (Chua, 2018). Representatives will have to consider if this is the right path for the 4G leadership to take.

### **Should Less Government Assistance be Given?**

Another issue that representatives have to consider is the possibility of less public assistance being given to Singaporeans, except to the really destitute and needy, so that the people take more responsibility for their own lives.

In the early years, Singapore, with a population that was largely uneducated, had to naturally rely very much on those who held the necessary academic qualifications to lead (“Education, Language Spoken and Literacy”, 2015). However, we have experienced unimaginable change in the last 53 years. Education levels have soared, and we now have a population that is 97.2% literate, with our policy of six years of mandatory schooling (“Compulsory Education”, 2018). At least 88.5% eventually go on to receive at least 5 N-level or 3 O-level passes after entering secondary school (MOE, 2018). Thus, fewer people should require aid, as more should be capable of finding employment, managing their own finances and making better decisions.

Also, with accessibility to the Internet and social media, individuals are now exposed to more information than ever before (“4.98 Singaporeans Now Online”, 2018). Autonomy

in an age of literacy is highly coveted, and, as such, people believe that those of lower-income brackets should still be allowed to make their own decisions about how they live their lives and take responsibility for the consequences. For instance, if one, even after being presented with the information to make an informed decision, still decides to choose poorly, then it is one's freedom to do so, for example, choosing to spend money on cigarettes that would have otherwise gone to one's savings. The Government, and, by extension, society, would not need to 'pay' for poor decisions of some citizens as fewer subsidies or less assistance would be provided, except perhaps to those who are mentally or physically handicapped.

Now that Singaporeans have been armed with the necessary education and knowledge to progress, the onus should be on them, rather than the Government, to take the responsibility of providing for their own needs. If not, the burden of providing assistance to the able-bodied and mentally sound falls on the taxpayers, and there could actually be better use of government revenue. Also, this may discourage abuse of government assistance, as, with reduced aid provided or more stringent requirements, people may be more incentivised to seek employment or look for jobs with better pay. So, only the really needy would receive assistance. In the long run, this can only be beneficial for the economy and society as more people are more productive and independent.

Instead of handing out government assistance, some argue that it may be better to create the opportunities for individuals to lift themselves out of dire straits, of their own accord. They suggest opportunities such as better education to better their employability,

This is what Singapore's former Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam terms the trampoline approach, contrasting it with the proverbial safety net. He told *The Straits Times* in January 2018 that the trampoline does not mean people are left on their own. Instead, it means that instead of just a safety net, people are given help to bounce back up (“Social Welfare: Are We Missing The Point?”, 2018). Initiatives to increase capabilities and improve social mobility, such as SkillsFuture, are thus seen as the way to go. The idea behind these strategies is that this will compel them to take action to better their own lives instead of waiting for handouts.

## **Current Situation**

On the other hand, people who champion the status quo believe that there is already enough being done to aid people in need. It is the belief that instead of blanket assistance such as a fully subsidised education until secondary school, assisted subsidies are enough for a majority of citizens. For example, with these subsidies, Singaporeans currently pay a maximum of S\$13 for Primary level or S\$25 for Secondary level education per month (MOE, 2019). This is largely affordable to the majority of citizens. For those who face difficulties, the Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) in schools exists to provide support, and covers things such as school fees and the cost of 7-10 meals a week in school, as well as the provision of free school uniforms to primary and secondary students (“MOE Financial Assistance Scheme”, 2018).

Another form of assistance is the Progressive Wage Model (PWM) which helps to incentivise Singaporeans to keep improving themselves and allows for more

opportunities to better pay, especially for those working in blue-collar jobs. It was observed that wages in certain sectors such as landscaping had stagnated due to an influx of cheap labour and limited unionisation, as prices are locked in once contracts are signed. In turn, the low wages resulted in the high turnover of staff who leave the moment they find better-paying jobs, and this created the problem of labour shortages in these sectors. The PWM benefits workers by mapping out a clear career pathway to obtain better wages along with training and improvements in productivity and standards (“Progressive Wage Model”, 2018). This is to prevent exploitative work conditions and incentivises workers to continue with skills-upgrading and lifelong learning. Currently implemented in cleaning, security, and landscaping sectors, this model specifies starting wages for workers according to their skill and experience levels, so workers can get higher pay as they upgrade their skills (Heng, 2018).

In terms of healthcare, Singapore has tried to have a more targeted approach with regard to assistance. There are three different CHAS cards (Blue, Orange, Pioneer Generation) available, and these indicate the appropriate subsidies tier for people of different income levels, with those earning a lower income getting more. This helps to ensure that there is more targeted assistance for different groups. Furthermore the CHAS scheme has helped alleviate some of the burdens of healthcare payment of needy households, which can run from S\$212 to S\$284 per person per year, depending on age (Foo, 2016). Apart from that, other blanket policies such as Medishield Life and CareShield Life are meant to help with potentially hefty hospital bills by serving as a national insurance policy to those who may require expensive treatment (“Medishield Life

Premiums”, 2018). With these policies covering a broad base (all Singaporean citizens and permanent residents), the government has tried to help as many people as possible through these schemes (“Healthcare Schemes and Subsidies”, 2018).

Another prime example of assistance would be the Housing Development Board’s (HDB) Second Chance Scheme, whereby flat allocation for those widowed or recently divorced, with at least one dependent, is up to 5% of BTO 2-room Flexi and 3-room flats in non-mature estates, a quota shared with the 30% quota set aside for all second-timers (“Priority Schemes”, 2018). Singapore, being a land-scarce nation, still prides itself on ensuring that every citizen has a stake in the country. As such, even first-time flat owners are eligible for grants, depending on the gross monthly household income for the twelve months prior to submitting flat applications, with those earning lower incomes eligible for higher grants (“First-Timer Applicants”, 2017). This has already lowered the threshold of owning property in Singapore, aiding the needy in an area that typically is the most financially draining.

One in four Singaporeans will be over 65 by 2020. Recognising the elderly’s contributions to nation-building and our duty to care for them in their twilight years, the government has implemented a number of schemes in order to assist them. For example, the Seniors’ Mobility and Enabling Fund aims to help offset costs for seniors who require equipment to stay independent, such as walking sticks, electric wheelchairs, or even spectacles, among others. This fund can also be used for people who require specialised transport to government-funded eldercare, dialysis or day hospice services.

In addition, the Enhancement for Active Seniors scheme aims to help make homes more senior-friendly. Individuals are eligible for subsidies of up to 95 percent to install non-slip flooring and grab bars in their toilets, as well as ramps to make it easier for a wheelchair user to get around (Lai, 2018). With these schemes and many more like them, the government hopes to better support the growing elderly population within Singapore.

The Community Care Endowment Fund (ComCare Fund) was launched as a sustainable source of funds to assist low-income Singaporeans. To ease the financial burden of families with children, ComCare offers student care subsidies for parents who work at least 56 hours a month, and with children in registered Student Care Centres. Practising a sliding scale, the amount a household earns in terms of total income or per capita income determines the total amount of subsidies offered to needy families (“ComCare Student Care”, 2018). For those struggling even after these subsidies, there are other child-care subsidies that ComCare offers on a case-by-case basis to help ease this financial burden (ComCare Child Care Subsidies”, 2018). Furthermore, to address potential short-term issues that needy families may face, the Urgent Financial Assistance scheme was set up as a fast, efficient way to help the people that need it the most get back on their feet. Offering cash, vouchers, or food rations for up to a period of three months, the scheme ensures that households do not have to go without necessities (“Urgent Financial Assistance”, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

As a new generation of leaders takes over, there is both uncertainty and a sense of anticipation. The direction the 4G leadership chooses to take for Singapore's domestic affairs will have great impact on our nation. Though it may seem as though existing policies still function as well now as they did in the past, representatives must recognise the changes occurring within Singaporean society and abroad, and in turn decide what policies must change to accommodate these changes. There is thus a need to define the challenges Singapore faces now, while anticipating what is to come in the future, in order to best guard against them. Representatives should already carefully assess the impact of the proposed changes and which groups they may affect the most. Considering the social and economic implications of increased governmental action is but one aspect of debate. A larger and more important one is which would be more beneficial for the Singapore in the long term.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. How effective have current measures been in meeting Singaporeans' needs?
2. What adjustments to current government assistance schemes must be made by 4G leaders?
3. How can NGOs work with government agencies in facilitating change and helping Singaporeans?
4. Should 4G leaders move to provide more assistance to Singaporeans, or should the status quo be preserved?

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# Defining Singapore's Foreign Policy in an Uncertain World

## Introduction

The modern global landscape is defined by uncertainty. Increasing domestic political polarisation and dissatisfaction with established domestic governments paint a troubling picture of the modern world. China's influence and global reach have grown exponentially in the last decade, and the threat of superpower confrontations between the United States and China looms. Multiple points of contention in Southeast Asia continue to pose problems to the fragile unity in the region.

As such, with an outsized geopolitical presence but a small physical landmass, Singapore faces the crucial issue of defining its role as a small country in an increasingly uncertain international landscape. The key question is as follows: should Singapore act like a small country or continue to punch above its weight? This naturally leads to the next question: what does it mean to act like a small country? Some related issues include the question of whether Singapore should adhere to the ASEAN principle of non-intervention or if it should push Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya refugee crisis. Similarly, Singapore also needs to consider how to position itself in a world where Chinese dominance is on the rise. As the next generation of leaders will soon come to power, the cabinet is encouraged to evaluate Singapore's role as a small country in relation to its foreign policy to determine the optimal way forward.

## Historical overview

Since independence, Singapore has consistently practised pragmatism in its foreign policy. In seeking to foster strong and friendly ties with other countries, it has maintained a flexible and adaptive approach to diplomacy (Klingler-Vidra, 2012). However, this has not prevented the city-state from taking strong stands on issues it deems key to protecting its sovereignty.

Such moves have resulted in occasional disputes with regional neighbours and global powers alike. Disagreements with the United States, for example, arose in 1994 regarding Singapore's right to cane American citizen Michael P. Fay for theft and vandalism (Lee, 2018). Despite widespread criticism of the corporal punishment by American media and pressure from President Clinton, caning was still carried out. However, the number of strokes of the cane was reduced from six to four.

Nevertheless, with a continued commitment to resolve problems in an amicable fashion, tensions between other countries have generally remained low (Koh, 2017). Singapore has also consistently advocated multilateralism and a commitment by the international community to a rules-based international order (Sim, 2018). This can be seen in its active membership in numerous intergovernmental organisations, from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to the United Nations (UN).

## Timeline of key events

Here is a timeline of significant events which have taken place in relation to Singapore's foreign policy.

Date	Event
9 August 1965	S. Rajaratnam becomes Singapore's first Minister for Foreign Affairs.
21 September 1965	The Republic of Singapore officially becomes the 117th member of the UN.
15 October 1965	Singapore becomes the 22nd member of the Commonwealth.
8 August 1967	Singapore becomes a founding member of ASEAN.
September 1970	Singapore is admitted into the Non-Aligned Movement, signalling its commitment to neutrality in dealings with other countries.
April 1975	Singapore, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand sign the Five Power Defence Arrangements, a regional security institution whereby the five powers are to consult each other "immediately" in the event or threat of an armed attack on any of these five countries for the purpose of deciding what measures should be taken jointly or separately in response.
3 October 1990	Singapore establishes formal diplomatic relations with China, being the last country in Southeast Asia to do so.

January 1993	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Secretariat is set up in Singapore. The APEC Secretariat performs a central project management role, assisting APEC Member Economies and APEC fora with overseeing more than 250 APEC-funded projects.
10 October 2000	Singapore is elected as one of the five non-permanent members of the UN Security Council.
2018	Singapore assumes the annual rotational Chairmanship of ASEAN, chairing the ASEAN Summit and related summits. The theme of its ASEAN Chairmanship is “Resilient and Innovative”, and its vision for ASEAN is to be “united in the face of growing uncertainties in the global strategic landscape”.

## **Current situation: Taiwan**

### **Increasing global Chinese assertiveness**

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping’s leadership, China has become an increasingly active player in global affairs. Without a doubt, it is now a global powerhouse with considerable economic, political and military power. In a recent speech, Xi was quoted as saying China’s goal was to “ride the mighty east wind of the new era” and “charge forward with a full tank”, reflecting China’s ambitions to utilise its strengths to attain greater international power and influence (Panda, 2018). This is in stark contrast to China’s traditional, low-profile approach to foreign affairs, characterised by former

Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's motto of "Hide your strength and bide your time" (Clover, 2017). One major manifestation of this goal can be seen in China's moves in the South China Sea dispute. As China's superpower status grows increasingly clear, Singapore faces the uphill task of managing points of tension with it, while maintaining the principles and values it has historically stood for.

### **South China Sea dispute**

The South China Sea has been a contentious point of dispute between powers in the region. Brunei, the People's Republic of China, Republic of China, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam hold various competing territorial and maritime claims in the archipelago. China, in particular, uses a Nine-Dash Line, criticised by some as being geographically ambiguous, in defining its claim of historic rights over large swathes of the South China Sea, leading to disagreements with numerous claimants (Bader, 2018).

Though Singapore does not have a direct claim in the South China Sea, it has reiterated its support for freedom of navigation on the high seas and the support of a rules-based global community (Poonia, 2018). When The Hague tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration rejected Chinese claims in the South China Sea in July 2016, Singapore urged "all parties to fully respect legal and diplomatic processes". China, on the other hand, has criticised the rejection, calling it "a piece of paper that is destined to come to naught" (Phillips, 2016).

Consequently, there has been noticeable friction between the two countries. Soon after the ruling, the Chinese government publicly asked Singapore to "respect" China's position on the outcome, with consideration towards its role as the coordinator of China and Asean dialogue relations. Tensions further heightened in September the same year as the Communist Party-controlled Global Times published an report, implicitly supported by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which claimed that Singapore had tried to push for a stronger statement on the ruling at the NAM summit (Leng, 2016). Singapore strongly denied this in an open letter written by Singapore's Ambassador to China to the Global Times Editor-in-Chief (Loh, 2016).

In recent times, China has begun militarising the South China Sea in exercising their territorial claims (Bitzinger, 2018). In April of 2018, it deployed anti-ship cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles and electronic jammers to Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef and Mischief Reef in the Spratlys. In May, it landed long-range bombers on Woody Island in the Paracels, features to the west of the South China Sea. This has caused some worry over the potential of the South China Sea developing into a dangerous flashpoint, and demonstrates China's willingness to utilise its vast military capabilities (Chaudhury, 2018).

As such, Singapore is challenged to strike a fine balance between managing disagreements and finding a compromise with a deeply influential superpower, while at the same time protecting its sovereign interests and traditional foreign-policy principles.

## **Bilateral relations with Taiwan**

While Singapore has not officially recognised Taiwan as a state since 1990, the two countries have nevertheless had a historically close relationship. Taiwan is Singapore's eighth largest trading partner, importing \$16.6 billion worth of the latter's export shipments. In 2013, the two countries also signed the Agreement between Singapore and the Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu on Economic Partnership (ASTEP), seeking to liberalise and facilitate trade in goods, services and investments between both markets (Fensom, 2013). Singapore has also been the host to landmark meetings between Taiwan and China, from the Wang-Koo Summit in 1993 to the Xi-Ma Summit in 2015, demonstrating Taiwan's confidence in Singapore's neutrality (Ng, 2018).

One key aspect of Singapore's relationship with Taiwan has been with regard to the military. This is exemplified in Project Starlight. Signed in 1975, the military agreement allows Singapore to send its troops to train in Taiwan and conduct joint exercises, and has been called an "open secret" (Shen, 2017).

China has reacted to the military agreement by discussing with Singapore the possibility of ending Project Starlight and opening up Hainan as an alternative on numerous occasions. However, observers have noted that as Singapore has deep existing military ties with the United States, there are suggestions that the American government could

fear that Singapore's acceptance of China's proposal will result in the spread of American military secrets (Chan, 2016). Consequently, seeking to avoid damaging bilateral relations with the United States, Singapore has thus far avoided any drastic concrete changes.

Tensions peaked in 2016 when nine Terrex infantry carrier vehicles were detained in Hong Kong due to Chinese concerns over a suspected licensing breach. The vehicles were en-route from Taiwan to Singapore after an overseas training exercise, and were detained for more than two months despite diplomatic efforts by Singapore. Analysts believe that the move by China was driven by increasing displeasure with Singapore over Taiwan and the South China Sea (Chan, 2016). The Global Times further attacked Singapore's continued military ties with Taiwan, claiming that this should not be the case as Singapore supposedly cut ties with Taiwan in 2012 (Jun, 2016). While Singapore has protested the legality of the move, stating that the vehicles are protected by sovereign immunity, others have posited that it was consistent with accepted international practice (Chan, 2016). In 2017, Prime Minister Lee was also not invited to China's inaugural Belt and Road Forum. Similar points of tension have been speculated to be the cause of this "punishment" (Han, 2017). Mirroring the disagreement with China over the South China Sea, as Singapore seeks to maintain relations that are what it perceives to be in its national interests, it must also consider the potential trade-off of displeasing a rising global power, and further consider the economic and political implications that follow on a similar scale.

However, developments regarding the military agreement remain ongoing. Singapore has worked to significantly reduce the number of troops training in Taiwan over the years (Choi, 2016). Rumours also surfaced on the possibility of Singapore terminating the agreement following a meeting between Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Chinese President Xi Jinping (Lin, 2017). Such moves potentially signal Singapore's willingness to allow some compromise on the issue in response to Chinese pressure.

Future steps taken by the 4G leadership will be critical. Future leaders must consider whether further moves to end Project Starlight should be pursued in line with the trajectory taken in recent years by Singapore. Looking at the bigger picture, the leaders must consider how to manage relations with Taiwan, whether to cool off relations politically and economically if necessary or continue cultivating good relations, while being mindful of China's position and influence, and any possible impact on Singapore.

## **Current Situation: Rohingya Crisis**

The Rohingya Crisis was sparked by a campaign by the Myanmar military cracking down on the Rohingya in response to 2016 attacks on police and army posts, and has been deemed one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes in the region in recent years (Yusuf, 2018). In what the UN Secretary-General has labelled "ethnic cleansing", at least 6,700 Rohingya were killed in just the first month of attacks. Hundreds of villages have been destroyed, forcing nearly 700,000 people to leave Myanmar. Mass killings and rape have also been widely reported. Furthermore, the UN has recommended pursuing charges

against Burmese military generals for crimes against humanity as well as genocide (Petersen, 2018).

Apart from the humanitarian cost of the crisis, there have been fears of a growing threat of terrorism. Critics believe that Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya has been excessively oppressive (Sainsbury, 2017). With new Muslim insurgent groups such as Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army seeking an end to persecution of the Rohingya and recognition of their rights as Myanmar citizens, there have been concerns that continued violence and failure to restore relations with Muslim communities could lead to the radicalisation of parts of the Rohingya population that transnational jihadists could exploit for their own agenda. Such a security vulnerability could thus spread to and endanger other ASEAN states (Blackwell, 2017).

At the same time, analysts believe that Myanmar continues to have a substantial amount of untapped potential for economic growth (Toh, 2017). Thus, from a pragmatic perspective, it could possibly be in Singapore's interest for there to be greater internal stability in Myanmar. With greater stability, a healthier business environment could be established, facilitating Myanmar's capability for rapid development. Given the current strength of trade links between ASEAN states, a stronger Myanmarese economy could therefore be beneficial to Singapore, generating a similarly positive effect on the local economy (Shira, 2018).

Finally, as Myanmar's second-largest foreign investor, some analysts believe Singapore also has economic and diplomatic leverage with the Myanmar government, and thus a more pronounced capability to effect change (Choudhury, 2018).

As such, there seem to be incentives for Singapore to push Myanmar to resolve the crisis, and do more as a nation to address perceived serious security concerns as well as to reduce the humanitarian cost of the conflict.

### **ASEAN's stance**

However, the primary issue lies with the ASEAN principle of non-interference. ASEAN's 1976 "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation" effectively dictates that countries avoid interfering in the internal affairs of another ASEAN state.

## Article 2

In their relations with one another, the High Contracting Parties shall be guided by the following fundamental principles:

- a. Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations;
- b. The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
- c. Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- d. Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means;
- e. Renunciation of the threat or use of force;
- f. Effective cooperation among themselves.

### **Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia Indonesia, 24 February 1976**

Singapore has traditionally practised the adherence to principle, and the Rohingya Crisis is rooted in deeply domestic causes (Tan, 2018). As such, it would be substantially against precedent for Singapore to intervene through increased and overt pressure on Myanmar. Furthermore, ASEAN's rule-by-consensus principle makes any serious multilateral action against Myanmar, an ASEAN member itself, inherently impossible. As such, ASEAN has largely avoided the issue during Singapore's chairmanship; mention of the crisis has thus far been relegated to small footnotes in official statements. Singapore has also appeared to have sought limited ASEAN involvement, with its foreign affairs ministry denying the existence of any ASEAN special task force on Rohingya

repatriation, despite contradictory statements from Malaysia and Thailand (Choudhury, 2018).

Given such a context, the question now is whether Singapore should defy precedent in order to take on a role to resolve a crisis labelled a humanitarian disaster, and one that poses a potential regional threat on multiple fronts.

## **Conclusion**

Looking towards the long term, uncertainty is even greater, with the rise of populism in European states, deeper underlying tension between China and the United States that have yet to be settled, and a recession economists say is due in the coming years. In the light of this uncertainty, the next generation of leaders faces the fundamental question of whether Singapore should break from historical precedent to adapt to rapidly evolving modern contexts. Thus, the need for visionary thinking remains ever critical; only through deliberate and thoughtful policymaking can Singapore remain a peaceful and prosperous nation.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What should the 4G leadership's stance on foreign policy be?
2. How much weight should Singapore give to its historical ties when formulating its current foreign policy?
3. If Singapore wishes to maintain ties with Taiwan, what diplomatic approach should it take to ensure ties with China are not affected?
4. What compromises on existing foreign-policy stances, if any, must Singapore make in its use of diplomacy in the future?

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*This information is accurate as of 8 Feb.*