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## **Amid uncertainties, an uplifting reminder on importance of resilience and resolve for Singapore**

By EUGENE K B TAN



Mr Lee's 2019 NDR is notable for his preference not to have the economy be the singular, if not myopic, focus of his address, says the author.

In his 16th National Day Rally, a cautiously upbeat Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong cast his eyes on the future while addressing present concerns over issues such as the slowing economy and Sino-American rivalry.

In broad-brush strokes, he endeavoured to show how Singapore can remain an open meritocracy, be a city of human flourishing, and working not only to manage existential challenges but to create opportunities out of them.

In his speeches in Malay, Mandarin, and English, Mr Lee referenced the bicentennial commemoration in charting how sojourners from different homelands came to Singapore to eke out a living, but later sank their roots and built a nation-state that now stands tall and commands the respect of its peers.

Speaking in Mandarin, Mr Lee called for Singaporeans to know and appreciate Singapore's shared history, and the context that has moulded Singapore and Singaporeans. This is particularly apt, given how the US-China rivalry is reshaping the global order.

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While Singapore values her warm ties and close cooperation on various fronts with the US and China, he emphasised that Singapore had her own history, culture, perspectives and positions on international affairs.

But being a Chinese-majority country may sometimes result in Singapore being “easily misunderstood”, especially when the US and China are at odds.

This requires, as Mr Lee made it clear, that Singapore remains principled and steadfastly guards its independence and sovereignty. To this end, Singaporeans must understand and appreciate Singapore’s national interests and the Government’s considerations in adopting a particular position.

#### GOING UPSTREAM FOR AN OPEN MERITOCRACY

To affirm the commitment to an open meritocracy, Mr Lee announced various measures to improve affordability, accessibility and quality of pre-school education as well affordability of tertiary level education, primarily through enhanced government bursaries. This will be well-received by young Singaporeans.

The deliberate shift upstream from primary school to pre-school education in nurturing future generations “can make a crucial difference” in a person’s life chances, said Mr Lee. Of note is that pre-school education is now treated on par with healthcare and public housing, with the heavy financial outlays treated as social investments rather than mere expenses.

Although the benefits will only come years later, this is a big step forward, and represents a further development in enabling every Singaporean to realise her full potential and contribute to the wellbeing of society.

Furthermore, they point to the distinct shift from providing equal opportunities to ensuring and enhancing access to equal opportunities. Enabling all to succeed entails ensuring the best possible start in life regardless of one’s background.

Mr Lee also had good news for older Singaporeans: By 2030, retirement and re-employment ages will be raised gradually from 62 to 65 and 67 to 70 respectively.

The slew of measures — in light of Singaporeans having the longest life spans, declining birth rates, and concerns over retirement adequacy — include raising employers’ Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions, which currently have progressively lower contribution rates from age 55 years onwards.

Mr Lee was also quick to remind Singaporeans that there is no change to CPF withdrawal policies or withdrawal ages.

#### ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND ECONOMY

Where the NDR took a determined accent was Mr Lee’s treatment of climate change and its existential threat to Singapore, primarily rising sea levels. He underscored the importance of understanding what climate change means for Singapore and the solemn and urgent imperative to embark on mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Whether it is raising the minimum height for platforms for developments, constructing sea walls, barrages, and polders, Mr Lee noted that engineering solutions are available but very expensive.

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But with progressive annual investments over 50 to 100 years — a tried-and-tested approach in developing Singapore’s military defence — Singapore will be ready.

In preparing well for this “life and death matter,” the inter-generational bonds and compact are vital. Mr Lee exhorted Singaporeans to make this effort; “otherwise one day, our children and grandchildren will be ashamed of what our generation did not do”.

Very few countries, if any at all, have embarked on securing their climate change future. Singapore’s exceptionalism stands out again.

Mr Lee’s 2019 NDR is also notable for his preference not to have the economy as the singular, or even myopic, focus of his address. Despite the slowing domestic economy and the likelihood of a global recession, Mr Lee assessed that the current situation did not warrant immediate stimulus measures.

However, he assured Singaporeans that the Government is prepared and, should the situation gets much worse, the Government will promptly respond with appropriate interventions to sustain the livelihoods of our workers.

There is no doubting that the economy and the drive to sharpen Singapore’s economic prowess formed the cornerstone for much of Singapore’s success to date.

The challenge remains for companies to innovate and transform, for workers to engage in lifelong learning, and for all to work collectively towards making Singapore a trusted brand that is economically relevant and appealing.

## ODE TO THE FUTURE

One common thread across the three speeches is the forging of a unique Singapore identity and ethos and the centrality of staying united even as external forces are buffeting Singapore relentlessly.

Resilience and resolve formed the subtext of the NDR as Singapore navigates a complex and uncertain world. Singapore’s can-do attitude, backed by economic prowess, fiscal prudence and robustness, long-term planning, and sustained commitment to good governance constituted the thrust of Mr Lee’s speeches.

Sunday’s NDR is probably the last before the upcoming General Election.

In a nod to the ongoing battle for the hearts and minds of Singaporeans, Mr Lee underlined the need for abiding trust — among Singaporeans, between the Government and the people, and of the Government in the people.

He also sought to impress upon Singaporeans the PAP Government’s track record. “What we talk about, we will deliver,” he said emphatically.

Despite the weighty topics, Mr Lee’s NDR speech clearly attempted to rally and uplift Singaporeans’ spirit in a fitting end to the National Day celebrations.

The themes from the NDR will continue to resonate from now to next year’s Budget as the spotlight now shifts to the fourth-generation leaders who will elaborate and engage

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Singaporeans on the policy details and their implementation. This dovetails with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat's "Singapore Together" consultations.

In her 700-year journey, the ebb and flow of Singapore's relevance and fortunes indicate that nothing is guaranteed. Past achievements, despite the odds, provide the inspiration but cannot be the crutch. After all, it has been only 54 years since Singapore and Singaporeans first commanded their own sovereignty and charted their destiny.

The acts of faith that breathed life to independent Singapore will have to be sustained through the boldness of a unifying vision and the audacity of faith in what Singaporeans call home.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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