

COMMENTARY

# A pointed examination of enduring imperatives and hard truths for Singapore

Vital for Singaporeans and companies operating here to understand why and how the country is impacted by geopolitics. BY EUGENE K B TAN

MUCH of the attention following the National Day Rally on Sunday (Aug 21) has unsurprisingly dwelled on the plans to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code and the protection of the institution of marriage.

However, the other issues that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong discussed in his speech deserves similar attention. These include Singapore's external environment, economic challenges, and the necessity of long-term plans. In recent years, the accent of international affairs in National Day Rally speeches has increased. That in itself is a reflection of the geopolitical flux and vagaries we have been witnessing, which the man on the street is very much sheltered from.

This focus beyond our navel is important. Singapore's hinterland is effectively the world at large, and it is vital that Singaporeans and businesses operating here understand why and how the country is impacted by geopolitics, as well as the imperative to protect its national interests on the global stage.

## Principled foreign policy amid unsettling geopolitics

PM Lee rightly focused on the strategic challenges arising from a troubled external environment. The sabre-rattling rivalry between the US and China has resulted in the glaring lack of mutual cooperation on pressing global issues over the last few years. With relations unlikely to improve in the near to medium term, Singapore has to brace itself for the tone in global affairs to worsen against the backdrop of an apparent retreat from globalisation.

On the war in Ukraine, PM Lee explained Singapore's strong stance against Russia's actions. Singapore has explicitly con-

demned the invasion and imposed targeted sanctions on Russia. For small states, the international rule of law, the UN Charter, fundamental principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity cannot be taken for granted. The self-evident point, perhaps not appreciated adequately, is that Singapore's existence relies on countries scrupulously upholding these principles.

Amid the growing geopolitical contestation in the Asia-Pacific, besides taking a principled approach without fear or favour, Singapore also has to avoid being ensnared in major power rivalry.

PM Lee observed that the region has enjoyed peace for so long, but things can easily go wrong, as it has with Europe. As such, there is no room for complacency, and he stressed that "we must get real, and we must get ourselves prepared psychologically".

The prime minister sketched Singapore's approach to an increasingly volatile and uncertain global environment: First, Singapore stands firm on fundamental principles of international law and will work with other countries to uphold a rules-based order. Addressing concerns that the government stuck its neck out unnecessarily in speaking firmly against Russia's aggression, PM Lee asserted that "taking cover and keeping quiet will hurt Singapore in the long term".

He was even more pointed in his Mandarin speech: "If we do not stand firm and take a clear stand on the Ukraine crisis, should Singapore be invaded one day, no one will speak up for us".

Second, Singapore has to take National Service seriously, and ensure that the Singapore Armed Forces and Home Team remain strong and credible. PM Lee offered



Singapore's hinterland is effectively the world at large, and it is vital that Singaporeans and businesses operating here understand why and how the country is impacted by geopolitics, as well as the imperative to protect its national interests on the global stage. PHOTO: BT FILE

another hard truth: "If we do not defend ourselves, no one is going to defend us on our behalf". The relative peace and stability experienced in the past 6 decades can lull us into a false sense of security.

Third, Singaporeans must remain united, all the more so given the country's inherent diversity. PM Lee also cautioned about hostile foreign influence operations which often seek to undermine the sovereignty and independence of a nation-state and to sow societal discord.

## A global city even with deglobalisation

The fate of small nation-states include the need to remain open and connected to the world. So even as globalisation wanes and countries turn inwards and protectionist, Singapore must remain a global city.

As PM Lee put it starkly: "We cannot survive in any other way ... To

make a living, we will always require foreign investments, overseas markets, and excellent transport and communications links with all parts of the world".

This necessarily means the imperative to augment the workforce with a world-class talent pool, given the relative small population and declining birth rates. Again, another hard truth that Lee put it pithily: "When it comes to top talent, we can never have enough. This is an age where talent makes all the difference to a nation's success. We need to focus on attracting and retaining top talent, in the same way we focus on attracting and retaining investments".

PM Lee noted that many advanced economies are courting the best minds. Singaporean talents are similarly being recruited by others, such as via the UK's special visa scheme for graduates from the top 50 universities in the world outside the UK, including the Na-

tional University of Singapore and the Nanyang Technological University.

In other words, talented people, including those from Singapore, have no lack of options as to where they can live, work, and pursue their aspirations. Immigration was discussed at last year's Rally as well. This reflects both the imperative of Singapore to be continually attractive to foreign businesses, investors, and business executives and the concern about the impact of large numbers of non-residents living and working here.

The reality is that Singapore is not just a global city-state but it is also a nation-state. It cannot just be Singapore Inc where people come and go, as there is the Singapore core that has a deep sense of belonging and an enduring, vested stake in the country's success.

Even as the government continues to ease people's concerns, businesses in Singapore must rec-

ognise their social responsibility to not only be fair to Singaporeans at the workplace, but to also play their part in nurturing local talent.

As companies derive benefit from being located in Singapore, they must also contribute to keeping Singapore open to the world – people, ideas, and investments. This means they have a shared stake in making immigration work not only for themselves, but also for Singapore and Singaporeans.

## Taking on a changing world

We are not out of the woods yet as the global pandemic continues with its unpredictable arc. Moreover, the geopolitical situation regionally and globally makes economic recovery challenging.

But Singapore is well positioned to recover even with the inevitable ups and downs along the way. PM Lee emphasised the 3 key fundamentals of a united people, a high-quality leadership team, and high trust between the people and their leaders in the moulding and management of the virtuous cycle of success in Singapore.

If we are indeed at the end of an era of peace, it is crucial that, in a more dangerous world, we adapt even more nimbly and resiliently to the world while remaining steadfast to our core values and principles. We cannot and should not attempt to change the world, but we can determine whether we are prepared and ready to take on a changing world. PM Lee's clarion call to the nation offers an uplifting assessment that Singapore can thrive in a world that is less peaceful and more dangerous.

The writer is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University, and a former Nominated Member of Parliament.