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For *The Straits Times*

Barely 20 months ago, in December 2019 before Covid-19 surfaced, if you had told me that the most densely populated country in the world, Singapore, would have to lock up its entire 5.8 million population on a truly tiny island for almost two years, I would have said that the people would suffer great stresses and strains, with many explosions of anger and discontent.

Under normal circumstances, most Singaporeans travel overseas, especially in the region, to escape the country's tight space constraints. Without this safety valve, psychological anger and discontent should have gone up.

But it didn't! Overall, Singapore society has remained calm and measured, even with a series of severe restrictions, starting with a "circuit breaker lockdown" in April last year. Certainly, unhappiness has increased, especially for those whose livelihoods have been disrupted or damaged. Still, much of the economic distress was taken care of by generous fiscal support measures. Few countries can spend approximately 20 per cent of its gross national product (GNP) on economic relief measures.

Money could take care of economic stresses. It couldn't relieve some of the social stresses. A few waves of anger emerged over the last 18 months. None were serious enough to cause serious social unrest. However, several incidents revealed the existence of some social fissures in Singapore. We need to pay attention to them.

One fissure is between occupants of Kampung (Majulah) Singapura and the global city that S. Rajaratnam, our first foreign minister, dreamed of. Some of us, like me, live in both communities. Having been born and grown up in poor Third World Singapore, I studied at neighbourhood schools, speak Singlish, curse in Hokkien, relish char kway teow, nasi lemak and thosai, am blessed with friends in all three communities, Chinese, Malay and Indian – I am a native of Kampung Singapura.

Yet, having lived in New York for over a decade and participated in many global gatherings, I also belong to the club of globalised Singaporeans. Since I straddle both communities, I can see clearly the tensions between the two.

DELINKING CECA AND THE CORONAVIRUS

One source of tensions surfaced clearly when there was an outbreak of the Delta variant from South Asia around February. My WhatsApp chat account exploded

By Invitation

Celebrating Kampung Singapura and Global Singapore

Despite the tensions that arise occasionally, the symbiotic synergy between the two identities is what makes Singapore truly special

with angry messages from fellow Singaporeans blaming the "CECA Indians" for this latest wave.

Few noticed that Taiwan, which had also managed Covid-19 well, also exploded with a new burst of the virus, even without a CECA, short for the India-Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement.

Indeed, several South-east Asian countries, including Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand, and even Australia, suffered a new outbreak of Covid-19, demonstrating that we are dealing with a pernicious virus. So to put it bluntly, if we believe in science and reason to analyse difficult situations, CECA didn't export the virus to Singapore.

One great strength that the founding fathers of Singapore bestowed on Singapore was a political culture of being ruthlessly rational, as well as cold and calculating, in its foreign policy. There's no room in Singapore for sentimentality or soft-headed thinking. With this ruthless rationality, we worked out that when a small, open city-state like Singapore signs free trade agreements (FTAs), like CECA, with bigger economic powers like India, Singapore inevitably benefits significantly, by any cold-blooded calculations of costs and benefits.

Since the signing of CECA, trade between Singapore and India has grown from US\$7 billion in 2005 to US\$19.6 billion (S\$26.4 billion) in 2018. Investment flows have also increased, with the trade balance in Singapore's favour.

Let there be no doubt that India will eventually emerge as an economic powerhouse, even if it

stumbles from time to time. If we want to maintain the extraordinary level of prosperity Singapore has achieved, with a per capita income that is among the highest in the world, we must remain one of the most open economies in the world.

This is the reason why Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh says Singapore is the most "promiscuous" country in the world on FTAs. Indeed, it is shocking that great economic powers like the United States and China, India and Japan – the four largest economies in the world in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) – have signed FTAs with tiny Singapore. There's an old wise expression: Don't look a gift horse

in the mouth.

GLOBAL CITY BENEFITS KAMPUNG SINGAPURA

In short, the global city dimension of Singapore has delivered massive economic benefits to Kampung Singapura. This is the fundamental reason why Kampung Singapura is far more prosperous than any other kampung in South-east Asia. We should celebrate, not resent, this global city dimension of Singapore.

History has taught us that when cities lose their global city dimensions, they shrivel. Just visit nearby Malacca to see what happens.

Certainly there should be safeguards to ensure that disruptions caused by any of these FTAs should be managed. These FTAs must increase overall employment in Singapore, not decrease it. And overall employment in Singapore has

gone up.

We must also ensure that the new migrants who come to work in Singapore must accept the norms and values of Kampung Singapura. I have been saddened to see some South Asian migrants bring their feudal class-ridden attitudes to egalitarian Singapore. Fortunately, social attitudes and behaviour can adapt and change.

A greater challenge will be to sustain our prosperity in a more turbulent post-pandemic world. But here is one shocking fact that few Singaporeans have noticed. Singapore is the most globalised economy in the world. No other country has trade that is 320 per cent of its GNP. Covid-19 has caused, as we know, massive deglobalisation in many areas, including aviation and tourism.

In theory, the most globalised economy in the world should have been hit the hardest by this temporary deglobalisation. But we weren't. One reason why we weren't is that we also have one of the most diversified economies in the world, with strong links with all the major economies, in part because of the many FTAs we have signed.

In short, even though my fellow Singaporeans in the Kampung Singapura community may be unhappy with some aspects of the Global City community that also lives and thrives in our midst, it is the existence of both communities that explains some extraordinary strengths that Singapore has.

Professor Anthony Reid, a leading scholar on South-east Asia, points out in a fascinating essay entitled "Singapore between cosmopolis and nation", that the tensions between our kampung (national) and global identity have long historical roots. He concludes by saying "the interplay between cosmopolis and nation will continue in the 21st century".

"We can be sure that Singapore, as supreme example of the type of cosmopolis that has long flourished in one of the historically most open crossroads of the world, will be increasingly interesting to a globalised world in which none can afford to isolate themselves behind a wall of homogenised national culture," he adds.

Equally important, many thinkers are predicting that in the post-pandemic world, globalisation will retreat. If it does, Singapore will be damaged.

Hence, Singapore should stand out and become one of the fiercest defenders of globalisation. To be a credible defender, we need strong support from our own citizens. This is another reason why celebrating our dual kampung and global identities is so critical for the future of Singapore.

The symbiotic synergy between the two is what makes Singapore truly special. Let's keep it that way!

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