

By Invitation

Renewing an exceptional Singapore

With National Day just around the corner, the question is: Can Singapore scale greater heights in the next 57 years, or will the nation invariably slide into middle-aged, developed country malaise?



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For *The Straits Times*

In just under two weeks, Singapore will celebrate its 57th National Day. There is much Singaporeans have to be thankful for as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic and reflect on how far the nation has come since independence.

Singapore's journey to this point has been indubitably exceptional – some have called it nothing less than a miracle. The question is: Can Singapore scale greater heights in the next 57 years, or will the nation invariably slide into middle-aged, developed country malaise?

This will depend, I believe, on whether Singapore can maintain an edge in areas where it has traditionally excelled, and succeed in building new systemic advantages embedded in people and society.

It is worthwhile to first take stock of the national narrative that underpins discussions of what Singapore must do to survive and to thrive. The narrative of competitiveness and vulnerability remains relevant for our time but may be in need of a revamp.

REFURBISHING THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

Generations of schoolchildren have been told the story of Singapore's unlikely rise – a tiny island state with no natural resources, which through the grit and determination of its people, under farsighted leadership, overcame numerous obstacles and built a nation. In the 1980s and 90s, there was a national obsession with being No. 1 – Singapore had the best airport, best airline, busiest sea port, and even the highest man-made waterfall in the world at Bird Park. Later, top rankings in global competitiveness indices were celebrated, as were



For Singapore to continue to thrive, we will need an exceptional society – one that can accommodate different views while fostering a broad unity of purpose and national solidarity, says the writer. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

public universities' global rankings and Singapore students' performance in international literacy and numeracy tests.

The desire to be ahead of the competition was accompanied by a profound sense of vulnerability as a small, young nation. Singaporeans have often been reminded of how fragile our society is – hence the need to guard against racial and religious discord, to safeguard national reserves and build a strong armed forces as deterrence against external threats.

Now that Singapore has reached the income levels of advanced economies, and we are able to "punch above our weight" in international influence, some wonder whether the vulnerability narrative is holding us back – whether it ought to be replaced with a more confident posture. Others contend that Singaporeans would do well not to lose sight of our vulnerabilities, given heightened geopolitical contestation and the growing threat of foreign interference and disinformation.

The notion of competitiveness may seem somewhat crass in an age where inclusivity and solidarity are increasingly emphasised. But economic survival and success should not be taken for granted; otherwise, complacency and listlessness can easily set in. What is important to register is that competition is not zero-sum either among citizens or

among nations. Competitiveness is in essence about drive and passion – continually pushing the limits of what is possible, to achieve our potential as individuals and as a nation. This could entail collaborating with others for mutual advancement. It follows that competition is not limited to finishing ahead of others, but also about transcending limitations and reaching new heights.

As for Singapore's vulnerabilities, the question should be how to turn these into strengths. It is not about being fatalistic or adopting a defensive mindset, but making a virtue of necessity. Singapore has done this many times before: for instance, addressing water scarcity has transformed Singapore into a hub for cutting-edge water technologies. Our land constraints have led to the development of innovative urban solutions, including high-rise greenery. So even if Singapore is renewable energy-constrained, this should not stymie ambitions to become a clean energy and green technology hub.

The narrative of vulnerability can be paired with one of opportunity and innovation, marrying confidence and circumspection as we address the challenges of the 21st century.

FINANCIAL STRENGTH AND FUTURE-READY INFRASTRUCTURE

The financial reserves which earlier generations have

accumulated confer on Singapore a significant advantage today. Besides providing insurance against the proverbial rainy day, Singapore's past reserves generate investment returns that directly contribute about a fifth of the Government's annual budget. In contrast, many other developed and developing countries rely significantly on borrowing to meet their public spending needs. The reserves will become even more of an asset as interest rates and borrowing costs rise across the world. Stewarding the reserves well will ensure that future generations will continue to enjoy the fruits of this inheritance.

Integral to Singapore's economic success to date has been the development of world-class infrastructure, including our transport and digital hardware. This has enhanced Singapore's connectivity to the world and consolidated our hub status, from which our businesses and workers derive an economic premium. Renewing our infrastructure for the future requires long-term planning and considerable investment. The development of Changi Airport Terminal 5 and 5G infrastructure, for instance, are vital for future economic capacity and growth.

PASSIONATE PEOPLE AND EXCEPTIONAL LEADERS

People have always been seen as

Singapore's most important resource. A disciplined and skilled workforce played a key role in Singapore's industrialisation following Independence. Going forward, diligence and competence remain vital workforce traits but are not enough to propel Singapore to the next phase of development. With wages rising to the levels of advanced economies, capabilities will have to increase further if Singapore is to remain competitive. This calls for a spirit of innovation and enterprise in each worker and citizen.

Already, efforts are under way in our schools and tertiary institutions to encourage creativity, risk-taking and innovation. With greater financial resources, more young Singaporeans are pursuing their passion in the arts, sports, hobbies and social causes – some succeeding in turning these into vocations. These pursuits may seem frivolous at first glance, but they augur well for a more innovative Singapore.

It is not just the young who need to be passionate and inventive; in Singapore's greying workforce, Singaporeans of all ages will need to find the spark that turns a job into a calling. If more Singaporeans can find passion and purpose in their work, productivity will increase along with work and overall life satisfaction. This will unlock

individual and collective potential, and take the country to the next level.

Exceptional political leadership will continue to be critical for Singapore's success, but the type of leadership needed today may be different from that in the early years of nation building.

A major difference is that the gap in education and experience between the leadership and the populace has narrowed considerably over the years. Among today's citizens are many well-informed and professionally accomplished people who are inclined to question the Government's policies and programmes. A good number may have expertise and experience in business and specific domains beyond what the political leaders possess.

Founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and his comrades walked the ground and consulted widely, but they did not think it necessary to have a "national conversation". Today, citizens expect to be consulted and engaged; indeed, the Government would do well to tap their ideas, energy and resources.

A leader today does not have to be the smartest person available, but he or she must be able to harness the collective wisdom of team members, to provide direction and coordination and to persuade others to get behind a vision. Given the many competing ideologies and interests in today's heterogeneous society, we will still need exceptional leaders, albeit with different strengths from those of yesteryear, to hold the polity together and take the nation forward.

AN EXCEPTIONAL SOCIETY

Countries larger than Singapore have no lack of capable men and women among the ranks of their citizens and leaders. However, many of these states still struggle to pass their legislative agenda, and are beset by infighting, both within and between political parties and their supporters.

As a result, considerable time and resources are expended unproductively while society becomes polarised.

For Singapore to continue to thrive, we will need an exceptional society – one that can accommodate different views while fostering a broad unity of purpose and national solidarity. I have written previously about the importance of having a strong middle ground of well-informed, responsible citizens who are committed to the national interest. This will allow the competition of ideas within a democracy to build up rather than tear down society. The evolution of the polity – a task that falls to both citizens and leaders – will perhaps above all else define Singapore's trajectory over the next 57 years.

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