

Future crises: How not to fight the last war

Lessons from Singapore's Covid-19 response include planning for new scenarios and possibilities



Terence Ho

Post-pandemic life has featured prominently in the media lately. While *The Last Of Us*, a TV drama series about survivors of a civilisation-ending global pandemic, has acquired a wide following, we are in fact already living in post-pandemic reality. This is underscored by a recently released White Paper assessing how Singapore handled its Covid-19 response.

The report on the nation's performance listed eight things that Singapore did well, and six areas where there were lapses or room for improvement. It also drew lessons in preparation for future pandemics.

In reporting on the White Paper, *Straits Times* senior health correspondent Salma Khalik noted that it was "not a self-congratulatory exercise but an effort to understand how it (Singapore) can build on its successes and avoid the errors committed in the fog of war, when the next big pandemic knocks on its doors".

The imagery conjured by the phrase "fog of war" resonates in a particular lesson to be learnt about dealing with new challenges. It brings to mind another military metaphor – "fighting the last war". This refers to the common mistake of planning for old challenges without taking into account new circumstances and possibilities, be it to do with a pandemic, a financial crisis, or some other eventuality.

A striking example comes from World War II. Drawing from the trench warfare experience of World War I, French military planners constructed a massive defensive fortification, the Maginot Line, along their borders; however, the rigid defences quickly succumbed to a German blitzkrieg ("lightning war") of speed and mobility.

Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said on Monday, at the opening of the parliamentary debate on the motion on the Covid-19 response: "While we learn from this and past experiences, we must also have the flexibility of mind to adjust to new situations, and not be trapped by fixed views of how a crisis might unfold."

With this in mind, how can policymakers prepare for the future without falling into the trap of fighting the last war? Here are four ways.



In Singapore's Covid-19 response, the authorities did well in changing course quickly in the light of new information and developments, says the writer. BERITA HARIAN FILE PHOTO

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

The first is to test assumptions and plan for a variety of scenarios, taking in diverse viewpoints.

Mr Wong noted that while Singapore's prior experience with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) "helped us to avoid a cold start, it also in some ways contributed to us making some wrong initial assumptions" in regard to Covid-19. Among these was the notion that the virus could be spread only by infected people showing symptoms, which was the case with Sars. This led to inadequate infection protocols in migrant worker dormitories, as well as the initial guidance to the public to wear masks only when unwell.

This lesson also applies to financial crises, such as in the United States with the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank following a bank run triggered by rising interest rates. Much attention had been given to credit risk following the 2008 global financial crisis. But regulators glossed over the interest rate risk that emerged these past few months for mid-sized banks holding large quantities of ultra-safe US government Treasury bonds.

Preparation also means not just stress-testing systems and processes based on standard planning parameters, but trying to envisage how these parameters could change during a crisis.

For example, plans that relied on purchase of essential medical supplies from different countries were thrown into disarray during Covid-19 when governments

enacted export controls, and shipping and logistics were disrupted by disease outbreaks and infection control measures.

Planners would do well to invite external parties to rigorously challenge their contingency plans for blind spots and cognitive biases. Merely assembling a diverse group of people to provide feedback does not guarantee diversity in thinking. There must be a conscious effort to seek the input of every member, so that not just the most senior or vocal will be heard.

RESPOND NIMBLY, PAY ATTENTION TO WEAK SIGNALS

In Singapore's Covid-19 response, the authorities did well in changing course quickly in the light of new information and developments. When it was understood that asymptomatic airborne transmission of the virus was possible, mask-wearing in public places was made mandatory, reversing the Government's previous stance.

Onerous contact tracing and isolation protocols were dropped when more transmissible but less deadly variants of the virus emerged, and as the population acquired greater immunity through vaccination or past infection.

Likewise, the initial Jobs Support Scheme wage offset of 8 per cent – not far from the 12 per cent given during the Sars crisis – was quickly raised when the magnitude of the potential economic fallout from Covid-19 became apparent.

An effective crisis response will

have to be "a combination of preparedness and improvisation", as the White Paper put it. This is also why we should avoid simplistic takeaways such as concluding it is always better to close or reopen borders earlier or later in response to the emergence of a disease of international concern. This is highly context-specific, and the risks of under- and over-reacting have to be calibrated accordingly.

Whether the correct call is made may be evident only in hindsight, and even so, views may differ. What is more important is to have the feelers and mechanisms to make timely course corrections along the way.

A key part of being responsive is being attuned to weak signals before they erupt into full-blown crises. It is important to have protocols to assess emergent risks and bring them to management attention in a timely way. Tracking near misses, too, allows an organisation to uncover previously unknown risks before they result in loss of life or property.

Regarding the Covid-19 dormitory outbreak, the question is whether the risks could have been addressed earlier, given that the first dormitory case was detected on Feb 8, 2020 – over a month before clusters of infections emerged in late March.

BUILD BUFFERS, DUAL-USE INFRASTRUCTURE

Often, capacity constraints determine the range of feasible options to address a challenge.

It was a massive undertaking to

procure sufficient isolation facilities to accommodate the large numbers of migrant workers relocated from dormitories. Likewise, the availability of quarantine facilities constrained the number of long-term work pass holders allowed to return to Singapore.

A limited stockpile of surgical masks meant they had to be conserved for healthcare workers early in the Covid-19 outbreak.

Building infrastructure and resource buffers is key to prepare for future pandemics, but this has to be done smartly so as not to rack up excessive costs. For instance, dual-use infrastructure could be quickly turned into testing or isolation facilities while serving valuable peacetime functions.

Partnerships with the private sector, through which private accommodation and healthcare facilities can be repurposed during a crisis, could avoid the need to hold all these resources within the public sector.

For essential goods and services, developing domestic production capacity and capabilities must also be pursued in parallel with supply diversification and stockpiling.

These are among the lessons reflected in the Covid-19 White Paper and the subsequent debate in Parliament.

In addition, the pandemic has again highlighted the importance of Singapore's fiscal reserves as a buffer against the economic fallout of a pandemic or financial crisis. The reserves must continue to be well-shepherded as a key

resource for Singapore.

RECOGNISE EFFORTS AND VIGILANCE OF FRONT-LINE STAFF

Covid-19 brought national attention to the critical role played by front-line workers in sectors such as healthcare, transport and cleaning. Many put their personal safety on the line for the greater good.

Post-pandemic, the daily effort of front-line workers should not be taken for granted.

For instance, those who maintain trains and safeguard public safety may go unnoticed in the absence of a major train breakdown or a terrorist attack, but their contributions should be recognised and rewarded. The personal attention of top management can go a long way in encouraging care and diligence in daily tasks.

Society as a whole should also give due recognition to those under the radar who keep things running smoothly, so that there will always be a strong core of locals who can be relied on in peacetime and crisis.

Singapore has emerged successfully from the pandemic "crisis of a generation", but we must be mindful that the next crisis – likely different from what we have just been through – may be just around the corner.

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