

BY INVITATION

2014: The year of Big Ideas

The formulas behind Singapore's success in the first 50 years of its post-independence history will not necessarily be appropriate for the next 50.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

This year will be a transitional year in the history of Singapore. It will be a year of major preparations for the massive celebrations we will have in 2015 to mark the 50th anniversary of Singapore's independence.

Several major events have already been pencilled into the calendar for next year. We will host the SEA Games, with many events taking place in the spectacular new stadium in Kallang.

The National Art Gallery is also set to open in 2015 and a team of Singaporeans will begin scaling Mount Everest to commemorate Singapore's 50th anniversary. The year will also see the first Singaporean fly into outer space, symbolising the fact that the sky is the limit in the future aspirations for Singapore.

Yet even as Singapore prepares for these public celebrations, its citizens should also reflect privately on where they want Singapore to be in 2065, at the nation's 100th anniversary celebration. Even though some netizens cannot stomach the idea, it is an undeniable fact that, since its independence in 1965, Singapore has been one of the most successful societies in human history.

Past successes

TO ALL those who would like to challenge this assertion, I have only one simple question: Name me one other society which has developed as comprehensively and as rapidly as Singapore has in its first 50 years after independence.

So far, no one has been able to give me an answer to this question.

Hence, as Singaporeans reflect on the next 50 years, they should also try to understand the factors that have led to this extraordinary success. In my earlier writings, I have suggested several factors, including the political leadership of Singapore's founding fathers, a fabulous set of public policies, and a remarkable ability to surf many conflicting geopolitical waves, taking advantage of each of them.

In this essay, I do not want to dwell on the past. I fervently believe that if Singapore continues ahead on autopilot and assumes that the formulas which carried it forward in the first 50 years will also carry it forward in the next 50 years, the country is headed for trouble. The biggest danger successful countries and companies face is to assume that success will be guaranteed. All those who assume this have come to grief.

When I grew up as a child, I could not imagine a world without Kodak. Neither could the managers of Kodak. As a result of this assumption, Kodak has become history.

Big ideas needed

WORKING on the assumption that the formulas of the past will not work for the future, I would like to focus my columns for The Straits Times this year in these pages on the new Big Ideas that Singapore will have to consider as it tries to achieve another successful 50 years. It is legitimate to question the need for new big ideas. Surely, if Singapore can lead a life of continued improvement, as suggested by the Japanese philosophy of kaizen, we can continue growing and improving.

Slow, continuous improvement is one way to march forward. However, we also now live in a more competitive environment, both regionally and globally. One measure of how well Singapore did in the first 50 years is to compare Singapore's gross domestic product (GDP) growth in relation to its two big neighbours.

The chart shows clearly that the size of Singapore's GDP grew much faster relative to that of its neighbours from 1965 to 2005. But from 2015, Singapore could be left behind as they surge ahead. As Singapore's relative size shrinks in economic terms, the country could become less relevant and more vulnerable. It would be foolish to pretend that this could not occur. To keep Singapore looking truly special in the region and the world, we have to come up with bold new ideas.

Copying best practices

IN SOME ways, even though our founding fathers were exceptional, they had an easier time. Dr Goh Keng Swee, the key architect of Singapore's economic miracle, used to say to me: "Kishore, no matter what problem we encounter, somebody, somewhere, has solved this problem. Let us study their solutions and adapt them intelligently to Singapore."

This brilliant approach, which Dr Goh learnt from the remarkable Meiji reformers, worked well in the first 50 years. Now that Singapore's per capita income is ranked in the top 10 (and some say in the top three) in the world, the country can no longer follow the easy path of copying other countries' best practices. Singapore has to invent its own best practices.

This also means that the risk-averse culture Singapore has developed may have to be discarded. In the first 50 years, it was wise to ask: "Has any other country tried this solution?" For the next 50 years, it will be unwise to ask: "Has any other country tried this solution?" Singapore has reached a stage of development where it has to be bold enough to try experiments no other countries have tried.

Dealing with traffic jams

LET me suggest one example of a new Big Idea, which I hope to develop at greater length in my February 2014 column.

In the first 50 years, our leaders wisely understood that as the world's only truly independent city-state, Singapore would strangle its economy if it allowed traffic jams like those of Bangkok and Jakarta to occur. Hence, the Government invested massively in building a road infrastructure that could carry thousands more cars while also restricting usage through electronic road pricing.

Our founding fathers wisely decided that they could not deprive the new middle-class Singaporeans the universal dream of car ownership. Indeed, they tried to build an ecosystem which could allow both greater car ownership and continuing traffic flow. To be fair, this formula has worked relatively well for the first 50 years (although the recent Marina Coastal Expressway episode demonstrates that adding \$4 billion of road space can produce what the wags have affectionately called the "Most Congested Expressway", instead of better traffic flow).

But this formula will not work in the next 50 years for a simple reason. Singapore can grow its population but it cannot grow the island much more (even though the country may well go down as the most physically expansionist state in the second half of the 20th century).

As a city-state, Singapore therefore faces a unique dilemma: It could run out of land.

Hence, every square metre allocated for road space is a square metre taken away from other uses. In the next 50 years, Singapore will have more painful trade-offs to make in deciding land use.

This is why Singapore should become the first society (let me stress, I use the word "society", rather than "government") to decide that car ownership is a nightmare, not a dream.

Hence, while every other society in the world, especially our Asian neighbours, continue to aspire to car ownership, we should start walking in the opposite direction.

Conventional wisdom

THERE will never be a car-less Singapore. But it is possible to achieve a less-car Singapore. I hope my February column will explain how we can achieve this.

One point is worth emphasising here. Our founding fathers had often gone against conventional wisdom. In the 1960s and 1970s, most developing countries spurned foreign direct investment as it was perceived to be exploitative. Singapore took the opposite path.

Similarly, the Government created novel institutions, like the Economic Development Board, the Jurong Town Corporation, the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation and the Housing and Development Board, that had not been tried elsewhere.

To move forward in the next 50 years, Singapore will have to think of new equivalents. The country cannot live on the intellectual capital of the past forever.

My big challenge will be to find new Big Ideas for my future monthly columns. I would thus like to conclude this essay with a plea to readers. Please e-mail to me potential Big Ideas that I could write about in 2014.

The Big Ideas need not be original ideas. They could be old ideas which may be appropriate for our times. Some of them may feel outlandish at first glance. Yet if Singapore does not contemplate outlandish ideas as the country celebrates its successful 50th anniversary in 2015, it may well be condemning itself to a far less successful next 50 years.

I hope 2014 can become a year of new Big Ideas for Singapore.

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