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# The Big Tent approach to ensuring Singapore's survival

This essay is adapted from the introduction to the latest book by Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Singapore Survive?* Published by Straits Times Press, Singapore Press Holdings, it retails for \$25 before GST and is available at leading bookstores or from the website [www.stpressbooks.com.sg](http://www.stpressbooks.com.sg). The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

Let me suggest three concrete ways in which Singapore can increase its chances of survival.

First, Singapore can take the "Big Tent" approach that its founding fathers adopted. Mr Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Goh Keng Swee and Mr S. Rajaratnam were the pioneers of this approach. As Singapore is small, its pool of top talent is naturally also small. Hence, our founding fathers knew that they must be prepared to work with all Singaporeans, even those who had been critical of the PAP and its leaders.

As an undergraduate at the National University of Singapore, I myself had written several articles criticising the Government and its leaders. These included a very strongly worded piece which warned that Mr Lee could be on a "slippery slide to dictatorship". (Those who are interested in witnessing this youthful indiscretion can read this article in *Can Singapore Survive?*) Even so, Dr Goh offered me a place in the Defence Ministry (which I turned down in another act of folly).

Professor Tommy Koh, my predecessor as Singapore's ambassador to the United Nations, and Professor Chan Heng Chee, my successor, also wrote articles criticising the Government in their youth. Prof Koh challenged the PAP's claim that a political union with Malaysia was necessary for Singapore's survival. He also advocated that an ombudsman be set up in Singapore "because in Singapore, the exercise of discretionary power by the Government is not subject to judicial review", and spoke out in defence of The Necessary Stage in the wake of Josef Ng's arrest. Meanwhile, Prof Chan's first book was seen as an attempt to discredit Mr Lee. Her second book criticised the PAP for weakening democracy in Singapore in order to consolidate its own power.

Many other critics of the PAP and its policies have been invited to join the "Big Tent" over the years. These include Mr David Marshall, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and Mr Raymond Lim. I firmly believe that we must continue with this "Big Tent" approach to politics. If not, Singapore society is likely to become more politically fractious and divided in the coming decades.

Second, the survivability of Singapore can be enhanced if we become the biggest cheerleader of Asean. It is truly sad that so few Singaporeans are aware that one reason Singapore remains so peaceful and safe today is because a giant political umbrella called Asean has been erected over South-east Asia, including Singapore. South-east Asia is incredibly diverse. In a relatively small geographical space, we can find Muslims, Christians, Hinayana Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists and Hindus. This range of religious diversity is remarkable.

Given this diversity, wars of separation should have emerged as a natural consequence in South-east Asia. As the Balkans of Asia, it should have been the natural epicentre of separatism and conflict. Instead, over the past five decades, it has emerged as one of the global epicentres of peaceful resolution of conflicts. Any objective audit of Asean and its contribution to South-east Asia would show that Singapore is probably the biggest beneficiary from Asean's success.

As a small state, Singapore has benefited the most from the culture of peace Asean has introduced into

the region.

On the economic front, Singapore may have also benefited the most from the gradual opening up and liberalisation of the Asean economies. Singapore's trade with the nine other Asean member states is larger than that of any other Asean country. Therefore, given the huge political and economic benefits that Singapore gets from Asean, Singapore should become the chief cheerleader and champion of Asean.

The third thing that Singapore can do to enhance its long-term survival is to go back to its roots, follow the examples of its founding fathers and go for bold, even risky, public policies. Our founding fathers were prepared to take big risks because they knew Singapore had no choice. Instead of being paralysed with fear, they displayed extraordinary courage. As a result of their courage, we have succeeded. Success, in turn, has led to a natural result of success: a culture of risk aversion. Indeed, this culture of risk aversion is one of Singapore's biggest challenges in the coming years.

The best way to change this culture of risk aversion is to launch bold, iconic and heterodox policies that will catch the attention of our entire planet.

This is one reason I have advocated in my Big Ideas series that Singapore should strive to be the first city in the world to move towards a zero-car ownership city. This world of zero-car ownership is already on the way.

Well-known futurist Paul Saffo said in the National Geographic that within just five to 10 years, "Driverless cars will share roadways with conventional cars. This will happen in urban areas first and will take a decade to fully diffuse. In the long run, people will not own cars at all. When you need to go somewhere, you will have a subscription to an auto service, and it will show up at your door".

By displaying extraordinary courage in going for such a bold new policy, Singapore will also help to ensure its long-term survivability because it would demonstrate that the culture of risk-taking was not confined just to the generation of the founding fathers of Singapore. Instead, it would demonstrate that the culture of risk-taking has been hardwired into the DNA of Singapore.

This culture of risk-taking may well be the best way to ensure Singapore's long-term survivability as many new challenges will come our way. We must develop the culture of courage to respond boldly to each new wave of challenges. If we do so, the final answer to the question "Can Singapore survive?" may well be "Yes, we can".

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