FUTURES CONVERSATION 2021

50 SHADES OF POWER

CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC FUTURES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(SUMMARY CREATED USING GENAI AND IMAGES IN THIS REPORT ARE FROM THE CREATIVE COMMONS)

The Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF) held its inaugural Futures Conversation (FCx) on 25, 26 and 28 October 2021. FCx2021 delved into the evolving concept of power and its implications on society and nation-states. The conference, held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, brought together 27 diverse participants to discuss the theme "50 Shades of Power" across three main areas: the changing dynamics of traditional power, the rise of new power structures, and the interplay between old and new power forms.

One of the key observations was the increasing fragmentation of societies. This was attributed to the growing influence of networked power, which has led to the emergence of new community forms and the dilution of traditional, large institutions' control over narratives. The internet and social media have democratized storytelling, allowing individuals and smaller groups to broadcast their narratives widely and rapidly. This shift has resulted in a more chaotic media environment where multiple realities coexist, and individuals can select information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, further polarizing societies. For example, the rise of movements like QAnon during the COVID-19 lockdowns illustrates how isolated individuals can become susceptible to alternative narratives that offer a sense of belonging and meaning, despite being disconnected from established facts. This phenomenon challenges the traditional power of states to shape a coherent national narrative and mobilize populations in the face of common challenges.

The participants also discussed the transformation of the nation-state. Traditional measures of state power, such as military might and control over physical territory, are being challenged by non-state actors and technological advancements. Asymmetric forms of power enable smaller players to exert influence, as seen in the case of Al-Qaeda's strategic impact on the United States. Additionally, the legitimacy of state power is increasingly tied to competence in wielding it effectively, as citizens scrutinize government actions and compare them with other nations. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted both the strengths and limitations of state power. While governments demonstrated their ability to enforce lockdowns and business closures, the effectiveness of these measures often depended on citizen sentiment and voluntary compliance. This dynamic suggests a shift towards a more collaborative model of governance, where states act as facilitators rather than sole arbiters of power.

In the context of Singapore, these global trends underscore the need for the government to adapt to digital technologies, engage inclusively with a fragmented society, and consider a reimagined Singaporean identity that transcends traditional nation-state boundaries. The CSF plans to further explore these insights and engage relevant government agencies in roundtable discussions to address the challenges and opportunities presented by the changing nature of power.

INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Strategic Futures (CSF) held the inaugural Futures Conversation on “50 Shades of Power” on 25, 26, and 28 October 2021. CSF regularly convenes its flagship Foresight Conference, which brings together thinkers from different backgrounds and disciplines to explore emerging issues of global significance. In 2021, the global COVID-19 situation presented CSF with an opportunity to convene a different kind of event. Futures Conversation 2021 (FCx 2021) was held entirely online and included asynchronous “pre-event” discussions over communications platform Discord as well as synchronous discussions over virtual conferencing platform Zoom. This enabled CSF to cast its net more widely to include more diverse participants.

The theme for FCx 2021 was “50 Shades of Power”. FCx 2021 explored the implications of the changing nature of power on the relationships amongst individuals, communities, corporations and governments through three themes: limits & drivers of old power, alternatives & new arrangements in new power, and tension & flex between both. FCx brought together a total of 27 participants from the private and public sectors: 8 dialed in from abroad, 6 were based locally, and another 13 were officers from the Singapore Government.

Participants collectively identified three distinct but interrelated areas where power was changing the world. They also surfaced possible responses to each:

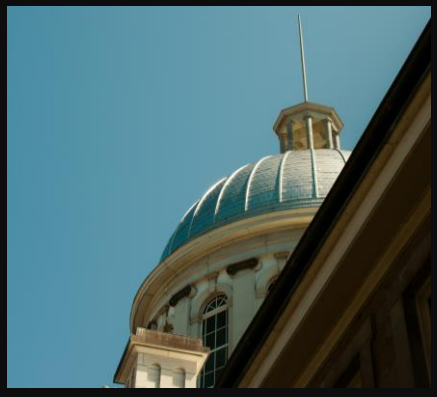
FCX IN BRIEF

Networks and narratives.

Power was becoming more networked, changing which narratives would be heard and believed. Even though large institutions continued to have an influence over narratives, the increase in distributed networks has led to fragmented societies and new forms of community emerging. As a result, states would need to be tolerant of ambiguity, employ multi-stakeholder engagement, and recognise that they were players, not referees, in this new landscape.

Scarcity and nature.

The COVID-19 pandemic had served as a reminder that humanity had not conquered nature. The broader question of climate change and its impact also figured significantly in the conversation. States could not simply engineer solutions without crafting compelling narratives on climate, but climate also offered a new frame for Singapore’s symbiotic relationship with the region.



The nation-state disempowered.

The nation-state was under pressure. At the country level, asymmetric forms of power were according adroit smaller players more influence, undermining the reach and influence of big powers. As states adjusted to emerging challenges, their nature and functions could change. National identity might become moot, with Singaporeans for example embracing a wider, more networked, regional identity.

Right from the outset, participants grappled with how to define the nature of power, in the present and into the future. There was broad discussion over how power was generated, who wielded it and to what ends, and who and how it was used to influence. All of these were changing. For example, if physical territory were the primary concern, power would manifest in the extent territory one could control, and therefore be thought of in primarily military terms. But if power was thought of as a machine, then power would manifest in the capacity to execute or as expertise. In the family, power would come from relationships; in culture, shared meaning; in ecology, amoral interdependence. In a network, power would come from connections and nodality.

Participants also discussed the interrelated nature of the sources and uses of power, and the struggle to disentangle cause and effect in this space. There was a problem with "infinite regress" in that it was difficult to tell when power was driving something, and when something was shaping power. For example, one could say that relationships in the family came from power rather than the other way around. When it came to government, competence in wielding power to achieve ends might be in itself a source of power. If a leader was not competent, their inability to achieve their goals would reduce their legitimacy. The measure of competence could be applied to both traditional and new sources of power. Without competence, one might have all the factors of power in place without being powerful.

WAS POWER GENERATIVE, OR ZERO SUM?

Participants disagreed over whether power was zero sum (new power would necessarily displace old power) or if it was generative (power could be created). Some worldviews were distinctly zero-sum: for instance, Indonesian culture held that there was a definite amount of power in the world, although it was unclear how they defined power in the first place. Another similar perspective was that power, once used, would inevitably be at the expense of someone else, even if such power might appear on the surface to be generative.

Changes in form - from hard power to soft - may also have shifted perspectives on whether power was indeed zero-sum. In a world moved by soft, emotional, or psychological power, as well as digital or virtually exercised power, perhaps (new) power could be created. A participant referenced The Narrow Corridor[1], a book by economists Daren Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. In it, a "Red Queen" effect was described where both state and society become more and more powerful, rather than one suppressing the other, showing that power need not be zero sum. This could be observed in social democracies such as Denmark and Sweden. There was also a difference between absolute and relative gains. Even if there had been a net increase in the total amount of power, an individual's power or influence may nevertheless diminish relative to another, and thus power was perceived as zero sum by at least some players in the system.

[1] *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty*. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, Penguin: 2019.

NARRATIVES AND TECHNOLOGY

Participants also discussed the relationship between technology and society. Technology was an instrument through which society operated, and hence society in turn was shaped by technology. It was therefore important to work out the connections between the two rather than examine each in isolation, as well as to examine ethical issues around digital technology.

STORYTELLING WAS BECOMING MORE DEMOCRATIZED AND SELF-REFLECTIVE

The nature and reach of stories or narratives was a key point of discussion throughout the conference. Stories were an important form of social technology (as opposed to a physical technology, such as semiconductors). Nation states and other institutions had traditionally relied on controlling centralised narratives that offered both support for those institutions and coherence. However, the past two decades had seen a strong evolution of social technology, first with the rise of the internet, and then the growth of far-reaching communications architecture that enabled the development of large information networks, which have supplanted more centralised gatekeeper-based methods of communication. The media environment has become more chaotic. Long-held assumptions, such as which kinds of narratives could take hold and have longevity, might fail in this more chaotic environment; narratives that used to be deemed weak could now take hold.

Some participants felt a more distributed, networked structure might encourage a more positive definition of power: the power to do things, rather than the power to prevent others from doing things. In the past, only a very small number could reach hundreds of millions. Now, almost anybody with an internet connection and a smartphone could reach that number of people. Social media had changed not just the number of people with large reach, but the very nature of communication itself. In the past, communication had been more linear, with a clear sender or originator of the message, and a clear audience or recipient of the message. However, with social media, the recipient was also the source of new messages to others, and communication now had a circular feedback loop. The speed at which this loop operated, and how difficult it was to interrupt, was part of the increased risk of spreading misinformation.

NARRATIVES AND EMOTIONS COULD BE MORE POWERFUL THAN FACTS

Emotions also had a strong role in shaping beliefs, in some cases more so than facts. Many communications strategists, in discussing what worked in advocacy, often assumed that simply presenting facts would be enough to enable people to make good decisions. However, outcomes suggested that most people relied on instinct, personal motivations, a sense of belonging, and other emotional criteria to make decisions. One notable example was how the UK had been divided over Brexit. Emotions driving politics was not new; Aristotle had already spoken about emotions getting in the way of prudent reflection that he felt was at the heart of good leadership and wise uses of power. However, dismissing emotions as purely irrational or disconnected from reality was also a mistake. In the Brexit debate, for example, there was a very real and deep sense of powerlessness and experience of marginalization, both economically and socially, that shaped Brexiteers' choices. External circumstances could also have an effect on people's belief systems. COVID-19 lockdowns might have led to rational and educated people becoming susceptible to conspiracy theories like QAnon, perhaps because isolation might erode a person's power to discern fact from fiction. Such stressful circumstances might also push people to seek meaning in fiction, making it "more real" than reality.

In today's "post-truth" era, much attention was paid to who had the power to put information out. Less attention was paid to how people absorbed information, or distinguished between information and emotion. For instance, the art world often had the power to shape emotions, but this was not a pathway often discussed when talking about traditional systems of power. There was thus value in equipping people to distinguish between information and emotion, though it might be a fool's errand to try to cleanly separate emotions from rational thinking. The social dynamics of group building, cohesion, emulation, and insider and outsider groups were inevitably present in societal debates, as signalled by language used in public commentary. When social media commenters said, "that's brilliant", they meant "I agree with you"; a truly brilliant view they disagreed with would be branded "controversial" or "polemical". There was thus value in learning how to shape emotional responses, for instance by including storytelling elements to make information more digestible or relatable. With this however came the responsibility to be careful about what stories we told, and what emotions we aroused in our audiences.

SOCIETIES WERE BEING POLARISED AND FRAGMENTED

Coming alongside fragmented narratives was the question of polarization in societies. Participants were concerned about an emerging disregard for facts as a basis for conversation in some Western societies. One participant raised the notion of a "TV society", where there were different, contradictory "channels" broadcasting on the same system. People could pick and choose which reality they wished to accept; these realities might line up with pre-existing divides, such as along class, or literacy levels. This had started in the US, but was now happening elsewhere. There were few if any attempts to shape a single, shared reality. It might have been possible to deal with such co-existing "realities" if people accepted that all these "realities" were, to some extent, fictional. However, this was not the case. Moreover, such a fragmented information environment meant that it was a big challenge for governments to put out messages and mobilise their populations in the face of common challenges such as a pandemic.

LARGE INSTITUTIONS STILL HELD MANY NARRATIVE LEVERS

Technology also held the potential to help states shape narratives. New forms of technology could be used to buttress state narratives or suppress alternatives. For instance, AI could be used for mass surveillance, censorship, and as a means of societal control. We were also seeing state-funded information operations or misinformation campaigns, used to undermine social cohesion in other countries. At the same time, technology might undermine state interests. Large tech companies were using these same capabilities to put out narratives sympathetic to their interests, whether it was via algorithms deciding what content individuals would see on their social media feeds, via control of the hard infrastructure of the internet such as submarine cables, or by censoring stories on the platforms they controlled.

There was also a possible “collision” coming: as nearly unbreakable encryption, which used to be the province of states, became widely available, states would want to pressure companies to give them access. For example, US law enforcement had asked Apple to unlock the iPhones of suspected terrorists. Governments were also unhappy about their inability to see rumours spreading over encrypted WhatsApp chats. The Chinese government continued to resist the internet-enabled decentralisation of communication and power, but it was doubtful whether other states could or would want to follow its example.

A root cause of this discomfort was a redistribution of power from the state or individuals to systems, which did not necessarily have built-in safeguards or have interests aligned with positive societal outcomes. Some argued that while industrialisation had spread power, digitalization concentrated it. In effect, while social media appeared to be a decentralised network, it was in fact a set of highly centralised networks owned by large tech companies that selected individuals to receive attention. Undesirable individuals could be “cancelled”, “shadowbanned” or simply ignored by the system. For example, it was impossible to access the old social media accounts or blog posts of Amos Yee; even his Patreon account had been cancelled. That it was impossible to tell what Yee was thinking presently were “tell-tale” signs of power at work. As a result, some participants felt that decentralizing power was not a likely outcome. Nevertheless, individuals could amass sufficient power to avoid cancellation – one such example being former US President Donald Trump.

NEW KINDS OF COMMUNITIES WERE FORMING

It was important to consider what new possibilities social technologies were enabling. Information technology determined what political systems were possible. For example, speech enabled chiefdoms, writing enabled empires, printing and then broadcasting enabled and strengthened nation-states. The internet had enabled a global community whose values had become more uniform. A certain segment of these people were highly educated, outward-looking, cosmopolitan, broadly tolerant and progressive – and they felt they had more in common with each other than with many others in their own societies.

Language was also an important commonality, which prompted discussion about whether sharing a common language implied sharing a set of values. A participant noted that there was increasing talk about an "anglosphere" due to the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the US and Britain. Since English was much more widespread today, and was likely to remain the global language for some time to come, that might imply the "Anglosphere" values would become even more globally entrenched. There was, however, some debate over how much language played a role in transmitting values. Culture was also transmitted through the family: how people were brought up shaped their worldview and their values. For those learning English as a second language, they might see English as a purely functional language needed to pass an exam, not a value-laden language. Another perspective was that language itself did not propagate values, but shared language made it easier for values to propagate across borders.

We had to pay attention to what other new communities were coalescing, including whether they were coalescing around new political identities, which could lead to "proto-nations" that would undermine existing nation-states. Out of concern for such possibilities, some countries had tried to "bifurcate" from the internet, but they risked isolation from the rest of the international community. Proto-nations were not in themselves new; traditional proto-nations included the Catholic Church and other religious communities. However, it would be useful to watch out for new kinds of proto-nations on the horizon. Another question was whether technology would enable "proto-states", where the idea of the nation could be separated from the state. Large tech companies such as Amazon and Alibaba were examples of proto-states, as they provided public goods, but only within their respective spheres of influences.

THE POWER OF NATURE AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT

Participants spent some time discussing the relationship between scarcity and power - did scarcity determine power distributions? For instance, scarcity in specific parts of supply chains might cause bottlenecks in supply, empowering those who controlled those parts of the supply chain. Other new scarcities included vaccine access, or resources such as rare earth metals or renewable energy sources. Technology could also transform scarcity: decentralized finance might make the reserve currency (i.e. the US dollar) less influence, for instance.

The COVID-19 pandemic had been a reminder that humans lived in the natural world, which had not been conquered or mastered, and that continued to be fundamentally inhospitable to human life. A thread through history was humanity's efforts to exercise power over nature, whether it be through social or physical technologies, with varying degrees of success. In some ways, humans had conquered parts of nature, and thus "rise to the top of the food chain": understanding the seasonal cycle gave people the power to organise farming, which in turn allowed societies to feed themselves, raise armies, and conquer other lands.

In his book *The Beginning of Infinity*, British physicist David Deutsch spoke of humans taking for granted their ability to live in cold places, which a millennia ago would have been hostile to human life. In the same way, improvements in life support systems could one day enable humans to live for long periods in space and take such technologies for granted. At the same time, these advances ran the risk of removing some of the adaptability that had allowed humanity to thrive in such a wide variety of environments.

GEOPOLITICAL POWER WOULD BE MEASURED IN PART BY POWER OVER NATURE

A related notion was that power over nature translated to power over (other) people. For example, the ability to control, modify or fabricate a virus, or modify the human genome would create leverage over others. When humans created the first tools out of flint, they were used both to hunt as well as to kill other humans. Similarly, national power might increasingly be determined by how well nations could master natural forces, predominantly climate change. How well countries could master their environments would be a competitive advantage: adapting well might result in a climb up global power rankings, increased attractiveness to talent, and better access to critical resources. China was a possible example of one such country: historically, it had constructed the Great Canal and the Great Wall, but today it was also one of the only nations doing carbon capture and cloud seeding at scale. Indeed, British biochemist and historian Joseph Needham had christened China the “hydraulic civilisation”.

It was also useful to consider what infrastructure and power structures might be useful in tackling these emerging challenges from the natural world. Non-state actors might have an increasingly large role in addressing them. During the COVID-19 pandemic there had been a rise in the importance of cities and a shift towards decisions being made at a more local level to respond more effectively to “tangible” and “intimate” geographies or situations. Private companies were outdoing national governments in making advances in space exploration. Participants wondered if there might be a “standard template” of governance for countries to deal with such future challenges more effectively; or solutions might always be specific to situations, cultures and histories. Regardless, governments needed to work together more and more cohesively to deal with emerging wicked problems.

NEW NARRATIVES FOR CLIMATE ACTION WERE NEEDED

Taking climate and sustainability as a case study, participants discussed how power was changing in the domain. In the past, past protests might not have moved the needle on sustainability, but today activists such as Greta Thunberg had managed to galvanize momentum for climate action. The group offered some reasons for Thunberg’s success where others such as former US Vice President Al Gore had failed: Thunberg’s youth made her relatable to a broad group, and empowered a group that had previously seen itself as powerless to speak up; Thunberg was her generation’s representation of an archetype of youthful innocence standing up to institutional corruption or inaction. What was new was technology enabling a wider response, leading to millions of other youths following suit, forming their own communities and movements to advance environmental activism.

There were two self-destructive narratives of climate action that needed to change. First, the belief that human beings could in fact control or mitigate climate change; switching to solar power, electric vehicles, and bioengineering seaweed-eating cows would change the trajectory of climate. Past experience had induced this belief. The Malthusian catastrophe predicted by the Club of Rome publication *The Limits of Growth* had not come to pass, because the world had engineered its way to better food security via agricultural technology. Climate might be a problem on an entirely different scale, but people had been conditioned to believe that engineering and human ingenuity would provide a solution. In reality, even if people would all "do the right thing", change would happen only incrementally. Second, the belief that there was a fixed timeline within which to act, beyond which humanity was doomed, was unproductive. Instead, we needed a narrative of continuous adaptation. A genuinely empowering narrative was one in which humanity would work on this issue for the rest of the century, not merely for the next decade. The spiritual element should not be overlooked, as a narrative based on virtue might move people, and make inaction "morally unbearable". For instance, the Pope's recent environmental proclamations had an influence on the global community of Catholics.

Shifting the conversation required a few things to change. Individuals had to feel empowered to act; with collective problems, no individual felt they could take responsibility for solving the entire problem, which was fair. However, it was possible to move beyond these self-destructive narratives, for instance by focusing on the question of intergenerational justice. Intergenerational justice had thus far been overly focused on unfairness, with "boomers" pitted against "zoomers". However, in reality it was not only young people who were concerned about the environment and climate. It was important to reframe the intergenerational question to highlight shared responsibility to and custodianship of the future. The reframing also had to recognise that in practice the developed world had been responsible for the initial destruction of the environment, including during the colonial era. However, the developed world had also invented technologies that had been of broad benefit to the developing world. This raised questions of who should "shoulder the bill" for climate destruction, or if there was a concerted effort to help former colonies.

Such shifts in narrative were possible. During the Cold War, the world had experienced deep anxiety about the threat of nuclear war, as illustrated by Danish science writer Tor Nørretranders' book *The User Illusion*. Today, most people did not worry about the prospect of nuclear war even though nuclear weapons continued to exist. As a result of government actions to contain nuclear weapons, the global consensus was now that nuclear war was a very remote possibility. Governments needed to encourage a similar consensus on climate and climate action to emerge.

THE NATION-STATE DISEMPOWERED

These emerging shifts had consequences for the power and influence of existing nation states. Nation states were accustomed to the use of hard power, and the control of physical territory. However, overweening advantages in hard power or physical territory did not always translate to strength. Instead, what had previously been perceived as weakness or marginalization could become weaponized; “weapons of the weak”[2] arising from asymmetrical differences in power could be exploited to create huge strategic problems for the very strong. For example, Al-Qaeda had compelled the US to spend trillions of dollars and shed American blood to fight them. Other weapons of the weak could be more “old school”: the yellow vest protestors in France or the January 6th storming of the US Capitol were relatively traditional responses to perceived corruption. The “postmodern turn” in Western societies away from a singular narrative to multiple ones could also be understood as some (marginalized) groups within society adopting similar tactics. New subalterns such as rural and working-class groups were using weapons of the weak to assert themselves. In Asia today, conversely, there was a perception amongst the intellectual class that catching up materially with the West meant embodying Western Enlightenment ideals such as rationality and empiricism.

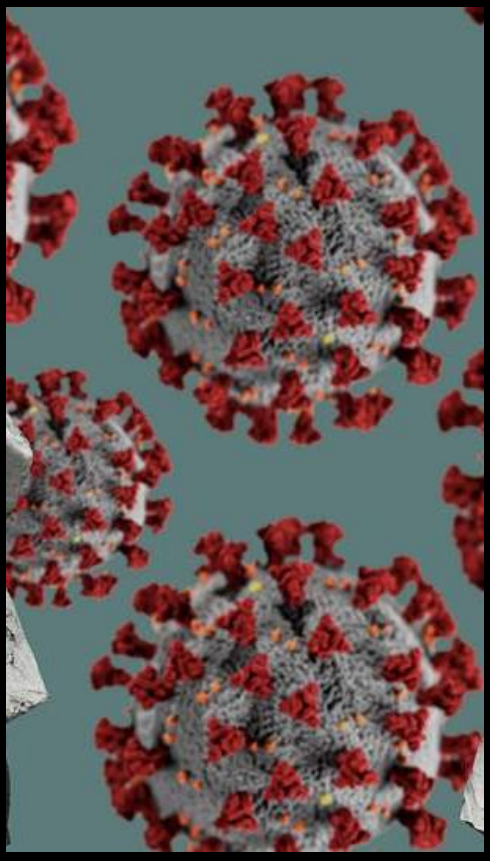
The legitimate use of force has traditionally been the province of the nation state; in fact, state power was often demonstrated via military power. In the past, power came from having a large population and natural resources to wage war on adversaries. Then technology overcame the need for large populations; small nation-states with money and technology, such as Israel, could overcome larger adversaries. One question that arose was whether emerging technologies were new weapons of the weak. For instance, quantum cryptography might allow everyone’s encryption to be broken, or for everyone’s encryption to be equally unbreakable. The decreasing cost and mass availability of AI-enabled weapons might also be a way of levelling the playing field. During the 2020 Azeri-Armenian conflict, the Azeris had rented armed drones from Turkey, including renting the services of military planners to determine where the drones should strike and the services of drone operators. This was essentially rendering weapons as a service, and eliminating some of the advantages of the technologically advanced states.

Going further then, one did not need to be a nation-state to wage war. A group with money and technology would be able to create a organisation that could withstand being overwhelmed by violence, or indeed inflict violence itself. Today a state could once again subcontract mercenaries to pursue its interests, or use non-conventional or non-kinetic tactics to coerce adversaries. The global war on terror and other insurgencies suggested that non-state actors did in fact have some measure of military power. Desperation also gave such actors an “asymmetry of motivation”, especially compared with states that might be less willing to wage war than before. A century ago, the UK had fought a war in Ireland to keep it within the UK; today, if a constituent nation wanted to leave, it was unlikely the UK would use military force to prevent it. All these developments then begged the question of whether states were experiencing some diminution of state power.

[2] James Scott’s 1985 book of the same name studied Malayan kampungs and saw how weaker villages resisted the authority of British bureaucrats through rumour and other means.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAD UNDERMINED THE POWER OF NATION-STATES

There was some debate over the impact of a crisis like COVID-19 on the power of governments. On the one hand, there had been a significant display of state power: governments had been able to shut down businesses and keep people at home. On the other hand, in some countries it looked like individual action had preceded state action (e.g. people had voluntarily reduced social mixing, then demanded governments institute formal lockdowns), and that government action was in response to demands from citizens. Citizen sentiment also affected the effectiveness and timeliness of government action. For example, the UK lagged other European countries in going into lockdown, as the UK government did not think it could convince citizens to do so. However, it did lock down once they realised that people wanted it.



Awareness of citizen scrutiny - as citizens watched their own government's actions and compared them with other government's approaches - made it difficult for any government to be radically different from the rest. In the Western world, only Sweden had done something different and had therefore received a lot of push-back for it. Mandating vaccines had been another sticking point. The Russian state had not mandated vaccines, instead of leaving the decision to provincial governments and private companies. This was not because of a liberal attitude toward individual rights, but because the Russian government feared making decisions where it was clear it could not control the outcomes and processes. In a chaotic environment, nation states had become "shy" or wary of making decisions.

Participants thought it unlikely that nation states would entirely disappear. They remained necessary to solve critical challenges such as climate change. Nevertheless, they could weaken or evolve; perhaps future states might not be tied to the concept of nations. The nation state also faced competition from other actors with the ability to make policy and exercise influence.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

ON FRAGMENTATION

Participants responded to an overall diagnosis of increasing fragmentation in varying ways. Some questioned whether the changes we were seeing were fundamental or inevitable. They asked how much and how quickly governments might be able to adapt to and take advantage of emerging digital technologies, which would inevitably shape how these technologies themselves developed. They also worried about how shared spaces and shared values within a community were shrinking. Some pointed out that the highly performative nature of social media coupled with emotional triggers had contributed to fractured communities. Some emergent consequences of the upsurge in social media's influence had been the accidental normalisation of previously-unacceptable behaviours, which had spilled from the digital into the physical realm.

In such circumstances, governments had to be flexible and tolerant of ambiguity. In addition, there was a need to guard against the sense that this was a zero-sum game where the increasing power of a particular group was seen as taking away from another. The Singapore government had demonstrated the ability to adapt, changing the forms and channels of communication between government and the public after the 2011 elections. In future, states would need a different model of multi-stakeholder engagement, to reach a more fragmented society comprising overlapping and interconnected smaller networks of individuals. Governments would have to figure out how to be more inclusive, and bring alternative views "into the tent without bringing the tent down". Downplaying social cleavages were a major risk, particularly where imagined communities or nations were formed in an information-rich environment. A state that could not "convene well" might face more severe risks of social fissures.

Participants also wondered what it means to “go on the offense” instead of always “playing defence” in a networked world. It was unclear how to regulate the digital space, including platforms held by the digital giants. New regulatory theories would be needed to reckon with the new business models (e.g. algorithms) in this new era. Governments that wanted to play by the rules of networked power would have to understand they were not a referee, managing the space, but they were players shaping the space with their actions. There might not even be a “referee” at all, with the space and rules shaped communally, by emergent behaviours. The government might not be able to be involved in everything, and should decide to leave some things to other sectors. They should also recognise that being involved in everything meant in today’s context that they would be blamed for everything. Rather than to focus on accumulating power for themselves, then, governments might instead aim to let society at large accumulate power from the ground up. A strong society co-existing with a strong government would make for an innovative, vibrant country.

ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Climate and the environment were clearly a pressing issue, and brought together a range of different challenges including engineering solutions as well as how to ensure fairness - both between countries as well as between generations. The Singapore government’s strategy had evolved over time, and now focused on how climate would affect Singapore’s long-term survival, and thus how Singapore could actively contribute to climate action. Any approach to addressing climate change would necessarily have to go beyond Singapore. Participants discussed how Singapore could play a symbiotic role, both giving to and taking from the region. For instance, Singapore had played a leading role in formulating the law of the sea (UNCLOS), which benefitted both Singapore as well as the region.

Singapore could play a similar role on climate, especially when it came to reconciling the interests and views of developed and developing economies. Participants thought a purely instrumental approach - for instance focusing entirely on engineering solutions such as polder construction - was insufficient. Perhaps a new narrative was needed, where citizens considered what kind of country they wanted to live in. This thought was sparked by the growing incidence of young people professing the desire for fewer children due to economic reasons, as well as a sense that the future would not be better.

ON THE NATION STATE

The primary question when it came to the nation state was one of identity. Participants discussed the distinction between a nation and a state, and how the notion that a state had monopoly over the legitimate use of force was increasingly contested. As sources of power and influence evolved, the role that governments and public sectors played in areas such as reducing inequality of access to data, information, knowledge or other intangible resources might change. The state might consider itself less of a regulator or referee, and more of a facilitator, aggregator, or moderator of discourse.

Singapore's dual identity as city and state was a topic for discussion, as well as Singapore's identity within Southeast Asia. Some felt that Singapore need not be beholden to the concept of the nation-state. Others felt Singapore need not be so anxious about defining our national identity, or drawing boundaries around what being Singaporean meant. Singapore should not be "embarrassed" by its port-city history. Perhaps it was even time to reimagine a Singaporean identity that went beyond the nation-state. Other Southeast Asian countries were further along in this regard, for instance Indonesia deliberately eschewing nation-based definitions of statehood in its Pancasila ideology, even though this had been imperfectly realised.

Today's digital environment, with its intense mixing and culture clashes, had its earlier analogy in the maritime trade environment of global shipping routes. Singapore and the region had experienced this in the early days of globalisation, and might be an example to the world in how to productively deal with cultural clashes. One participant, drawing on the local salad called "rojak" as an illustration, said their vision for Singaporean and Southeast Asian identity in the future was a very cosmopolitan, syncretic, east-meets-west idea.