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Editorial

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For Singapore, as most of the world, 2020 has been indelibly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. As this *annus horribilis* winds down there are some hopeful signs that we may be able to come to grips with the novel coronavirus, particularly with the prospect of effective vaccines on the horizon. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that the crisis will pass anytime soon, however much we wish it were so. The pandemic and its eventual aftermath will continue to have lingering and far-reaching effects on the economy and on society. In some cases, the crisis has accelerated trends—such as digitalisation or geopolitical

competition—that have already been underway for some time.

We are still some way from getting a full sense of what COVID-19 means for Singapore. Nevertheless, as 2020 draws to a close and a new year looms, ETHOS continues to document and reflect on the ongoing pandemic, and how Singapore has responded to its impact and implications. We have had to make significant changes to the way we live, work and play: some of these will stand us in good stead even after COVID-19 passes. We need to learn from and consolidate what progress we have

made, and continue to help our fellow Singaporeans cope with a changing world. More than ever, Singapore will need to actively build a more resilient society, continue to think long term and plan for the unexpected.

This Special Edition of ETHOS, building on [Digital Edition Issue 6](#), will be an ongoing project. We will bring you regular updates with new views and perspectives to help record and make better sense of Singapore since COVID—so that we might better gird ourselves for the world that may follow in its wake.

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The COVID-19 crisis has made abundantly clear that proximity still matters: it has become even more important to maintain strong ties and work closely with our nearest neighbours. Disruptions brought about by the pandemic have shown the risks of overdependence on any one node in the global supply chain. In bad times as well as good, partnering as a region can enhance our collective resilience and prospects. Market observers,¹ as well as Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing, have pointed out that while Singapore cannot expect to return to a pre-COVID-19 world,² our home region could present new opportunities: if we move quickly enough.³

While the four articles in this update were prepared just before the pandemic struck, they carry insights that still hold true in suggesting the growing role that Asia and Southeast Asia might play in Singapore's post-COVID economic prospects, as world economies pivot and supply chains shift.

The [longer-term Asian growth story](#) is set to continue, especially given the region's relatively sturdy response to the pandemic. Within this broad trajectory, there is much potential for Singapore to contribute towards and benefit from Southeast Asia's emerging middle class and growing range of increasingly

sophisticated economic activities.

As the pandemic has only underlined, close cooperation and coordinated government action among regional neighbours will continue to be key to the region's safety, security and success. But there may also come a need to [rethink how institutions like ASEAN can promote a greater sense of shared regional prosperity and understanding](#), given how profoundly interconnected our societies are. There could be greater efforts to engage with each other across the region at every level: not just governments and businesses but also communities and individuals.

To keep pace with the accelerated changes brought about by COVID-19 and its knock-on effects, we must convert the home court advantage—of our proximity and affinity with Southeast Asia—into actual familiarity, expertise and partnership. This will require that Singaporeans more actively [understand and engage with our rich and diverse home region](#) in the years to come. There is much to be learnt, and much we can do.

We would like to thank our issue partner, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, for sharing insights from experts that

have thought deeply about Asia and Southeast Asia for many years.

ETHOS is a platform for anyone with thoughtful perspectives that may benefit Singapore and the broad work of public policy and governance. Please do get in touch if you have fresh insights or viewpoints to share with our readership of public sector practitioners and thought leaders in Singapore and beyond.

I wish you an engaging read, wherever you might be. Take care and stay safe.

Notes

1. Janice Lim and Daryl Choo, "The Big Read: With Globalisation in Retreat, ASEAN Can Offer Singapore A Way Forward in Post-COVID World", *CNA*, August 24, 2020, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/the-big-read-asean-singapore-post-covid-19-world-13043964>.

2. Grace Ho, "Singapore Must Chart New Path as It Won't Return to Pre-COVID World: Chan Chun Sing", *The Straits Times*, August 12, 2020, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/spore-must-chart-new-path-as-it-wont-return-to-pre-covid-world-chan>.

3. Weizhen Tan, "Southeast Asia Could Gain as Supply Chains Shift During the Pandemic, Singapore Minister Says", *CNBC*, November 19, 2020, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/19/singapores-trade-minister-on-covid-19-work-from-home-supply-chains.html>.