

1. SUEZ CANAL BLOCKAGE

On 23 Mar, after being knocked sideways by a dust storm and winds, the 400m-long MV Ever Given container ship was lodged in the Suez Canal. It blocked traffic in both directions until it was freed on 29 Mar. This incident created one of the worst shipping jams in years, with 156 large container ships, tankers, and vessels backed up on both sides of the canal.



- Egypt's Suez Canal, which connects the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, provides the **shortest sea link between Europe and Asia**. The main alternative is a passage round the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, which takes much longer.
- It is **one of the world's busiest trade routes**, with around 12% of global trade passing through, especially in oil and liquefied natural gas, and nearly 50 vessels each day.

What was the impact on Singapore?

Disruptions to supplies. On 25 Mar, Minister for Transport Ong Ye Kung said that the Suez Canal blockage could lead to **disruptions and delays** to supplies coming to Singapore if the blockage goes on for a significant amount of time. This would have required Singapore to drawdown its reserves.

This incident showed how the **closely interwoven the world is** – the blockage of the Suez Canal exacerbated ongoing congestion and delays in ports around the world as shipping demand rose due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Need to manage backlog. On 7 Apr, Senior Minister of State for Transport Chee Hong Tat said that the first vessels bound for Singapore after the ship was freed would begin arriving in the same week. However, it is difficult to predict how long it would take to clear the backlog caused by the incident, as there would be knock-on effects from the congestion.

Nevertheless, the Port Authority of Singapore (PSA) **planned ahead** by increasing the number of ship berths, equipment and workers to increase capacity, as well as working with shipping lines to help them catch up. This is an opportunity for Singapore to differentiate itself as a transshipment hub with good connectivity and efficient operations.

[Sources BBC, 24 Mar; CNA, 25 Mar, 7 Apr & 13 Apr]

2. STRENGTHENING TIES WITH OUR PARTNERS

In Mar this year, Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan made trips to Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and China. His visits reaffirmed Singapore's **long-standing and substantive relations** with these countries, as we continue to work together in various areas following the COVID-19 pandemic. During the visits, he discussed **opportunities for future cooperation**, and conveyed interest in convening in-person meetings amongst the leaders. Here are the key highlights:

Brunei

Singapore reaffirmed the **close and longstanding relationship** with Brunei.



- Both sides expressed appreciation for the strong defence ties, the Currency Interchangeability Agreement established since 1967, and long-standing healthcare cooperation.
- Dr Balakrishnan extended an invitation from PM Lee to the Sultan to visit Singapore soon.
- As Brunei is the current Chair for ASEAN, the two countries also discussed ASEAN's role in regional cooperation and conveyed their concerns for Myanmar, and how ASEAN might support Myanmar in restoring peace and stability.

Malaysia

Singapore thanked Malaysia for its **close cooperation** throughout the pandemic.



- Both sides agreed that **strong foundations** underpin our bilateral relations, which allow for more fruitful cooperation in the future.
- Both countries also agreed to work towards recognising each other's vaccine certificates to facilitate future cross-border travel, as well as allowing cross-border travel on compassionate grounds in the coming months.
- Dr Balakrishnan also extended a letter from PM Lee Hsien Loong to Malaysian PM Muhyiddin Yassin, inviting him to attend the 10th Malaysia-Singapore Annual Leaders' Retreat in Singapore.

Indonesia

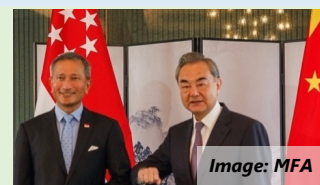
Singapore and Indonesia **cooperated closely** and supported each other during the pandemic, such as by ensuring the flow of supply chains and essential supplies.



- Moving forward, Dr Balakrishnan said that Singapore and Indonesia should ideally have the "same level of control" over COVID-19 transmissions before travel can resume "**gradually, carefully, and cautiously.**"
- Leaders from both countries also discussed about the developments in Myanmar and ASEAN's role with the Indonesian leaders.
- They agreed that there should not be foreign interference in domestic politics, but support ASEAN leaders expressing a common position on the issue.

China

Singapore and China have **continued their economic cooperation throughout the pandemic**, and share an interest in keeping trade free, open, and inclusive.



- Moving forward, Singapore could tap onto Chinese markets, play a key role in China's "dual circulation" economic strategy, and be a base for Chinese companies looking to expand into Southeast Asia.
- ASEAN and China are also working on upgrading the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA) to include new priorities stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the digital economy, public health, and reduction of non-tariff measures.
- Separately, Singapore and China are also expected to resume discussion on cross-border travel as both countries have begun rolling out vaccination programmes.

3. MUSLIM NURSES AND WEARING THE TUDUNG AT WORK

Over the past month, various leaders have spoken about the issue of allowing Muslim nurses to wear the tudung at work. While Singapore does not currently allow nurses to wear the tudung as part of the uniform, the government has been discussing the issue with the Malay/Muslim community and religious leaders at various closed-door sessions. After a closed-door dialogue with the Malay/Muslim community and religious leaders at the Civil Service Club at Tessensohn Road on 10 Apr, PM Lee told reporters that the government hopes that a decision on the wearing of tudung by Muslim nurses, for those who wish to do so while in uniform, can be announced by the National Day Rally at the end of August. Here is a summary of the key points:

Secularity and neutrality in policymaking

On 8 Mar at Parliament, Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Mr Masagos Zulkifli said that the government has been **“consistently clear” in its secular stand** and **deals even-handedly** with requests from different religious groups, especially when it affects our common spaces.

The public service’s policy on uniforms cannot be tilted towards any particular religious beliefs. Mr Masagos explained that in services that play a critical role in society, **the uniform is a “visible sign that service is rendered equally regardless of race or religion”**. The tudung is a visible religious marker that identifies a nurse or officer as a Muslim, which may lead to cases where the patient may prefer or not prefer to be served by a Muslim nurse.

Need for closed-door discussions

For **complex and sensitive issues**, the government takes the approach of **“careful closed-door discussions”**. Any government concession to religious pressure could cause other groups to adopt similarly aggressive postures, and cause race and religion to become increasingly polarising.

Speaking at a dialogue session at Khadijah Mosque, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law Mr K. Shanmugam said that **behind closed doors, the government and the communities involved are able to discuss their positions, sensitivities and difficulties candidly** before making any decisions and announcing them publicly.

Similarly, PM Lee explained that such discussions will **allow the government to prepare the ground** and make sure that everyone understands that any changes to policy have been carefully made and people are ready to accept the move. This will help to **avoid unintended consequences when making well-intentioned moves**.

“Our racial and religious harmony is based on treating everyone equally without prejudice or discrimination, and building a national identity shared by all communities, while allowing each community to practice its faith and way of life.

We have done this through mutual accommodation, compromise, and trust building by all groups. Over time, we have reached a delicate balance that considers the interests of all communities.”

– PM Lee in his letter to the Mufti on 31 Mar

[Sources: CNA & PMO, 31 Mar; CNA, 8 and 23 Mar; CNA, ST & Today, 10 Apr; ST, 11 Apr]

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