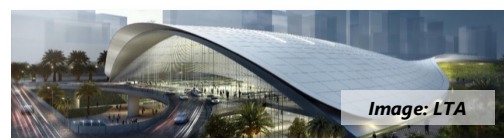
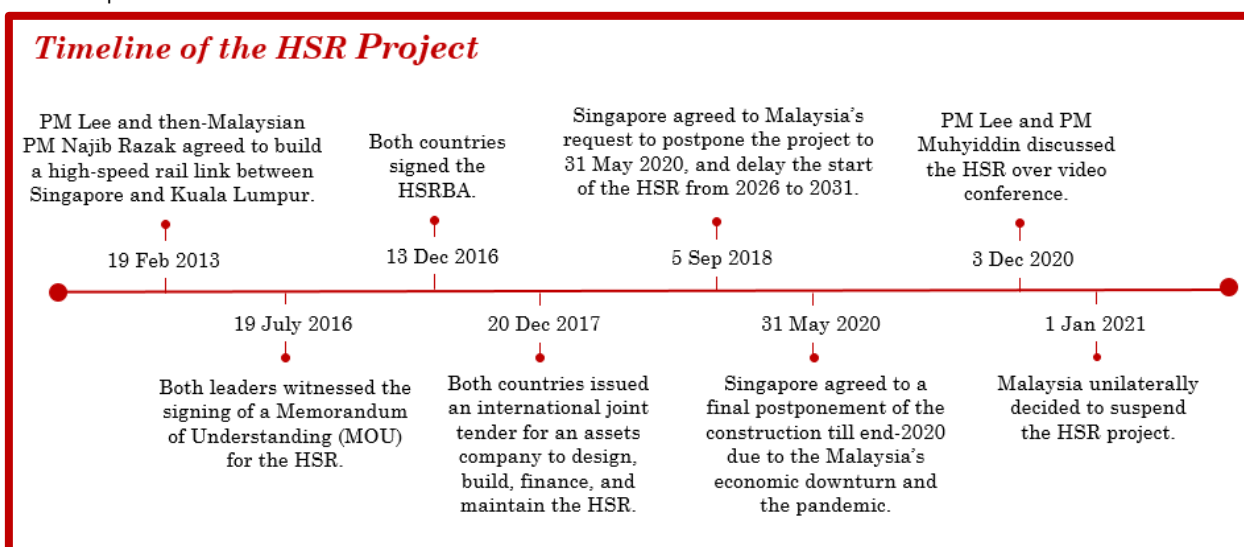


1. KL-SG HIGH SPEED RAIL (HSR) PROJECT SUSPENDED

On 1 Jan, PM Lee Hsien Loong and his Malaysian counterpart, PM Muhyiddin Yassin, issued a joint statement to suspend the KL-SG HSR project, after the agreement lapsed on 31 Dec 2020.



- In 2016, Singapore’s then-Minister for Transport and Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure, Khaw Boon Wan, and Malaysia’s then-Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Abdul Rahman Dahlan, signed the **legally binding HSR Bilateral Agreement (HSRBA)**. The HSRBA formalised the project’s technical, safety, and security requirements, as well as its regulatory and commercial frameworks. PM Lee said the agreement was a major milestone in furthering cooperation between Singapore and Malaysia.
- However, in 2020, Malaysian Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department (Economy), Mustapa Mohamed, said that Malaysia’s economic downturn as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic made the project costs no longer viable for Malaysia.
- At Parliament on 4 Jan, Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung said that Malaysia had demanded the removal of the assets company, which was to be appointed through an **open and transparent international tender**. As neither Singapore nor Malaysia had experience or expertise in operating an HSR, the assets company would have protected both countries’ interests by managing and operating the HSR. Malaysia’s demand was a “fundamental departure” from what was agreed upon in the HSRBA.
- As a result of Malaysia’s unilateral decision to suspend the project, Malaysia would compensate Singapore for expenses incurred thus far.
- **Both governments underscored their commitment to maintaining good bilateral relations** and strengthening the connectivity between both countries. The Rapid Transit System (RTS) Link between Johor Bahru’s Bukit Chagar terminus station and Singapore’s Woodlands North terminus would go ahead as planned.



[Sources: ST, 14 Dec 2016; CNA, SCMP, MOT & PMO, 1 Jan; Today & CNA, 4 Jan; Business Times & ST, 5 Jan]

2. VACCINATION BEGINS IN SINGAPORE

On 30 December 2020, Singapore's vaccination campaign began, with staff from the National Centre of Infectious Diseases (NCID) receiving the first doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

At Parliament on 4 Jan, Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong said that the focus for 2021 would be to ensure that vaccines were made available to Singapore residents by the third quarter of 2021, and he urged everyone who was eligible to get vaccinated. Here are some key points made:

- **The vaccines arrived after months of planning.** Early preparation and planning allowed Singapore to be prepared with its vaccination programme. Additionally, Minister for Education Lawrence Wong said that Singapore had to make "early bets" with companies to make sure Singapore was at the front of the line to receive the vaccines when they became ready.
- **The vaccines form a key part of our "multi-layered defence"** against the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are not a panacea. Minister Gan emphasised that Singaporeans should not be complacent.
- **They are a key enabler for our return to normalcy** and our economic recovery. Minister Wong said that instead of thinking about going back to life before the pandemic, we should think about how we can defend ourselves better and be more prepared and resilient in the future.
- **Avoid misinformation about vaccines.** Experts and members of the Multi-Ministry Task Force have urged Singaporeans to be cautious about information circulating online about vaccine safety and efficacy, and to keep themselves informed through official sources such as the Ministry of Health's website and mainstream media.

“There are many reasons why I think this would be beneficial: First, for my own peace of mind, for my family, my colleagues, and also to contribute as part of the country, to try to make Singapore safe.”

– Tan Chor Chuan, Singapore's Chief Health Scientist, after receiving the vaccine on 11 Jan



[Sources: MOH, 4 Jan; ST, 5 Jan; CNA, 8, 11 and 13 Jan]

3. TESTS OF OUR GENERATION: THREE KEY CHALLENGES

On 12 Jan, in an Op-Ed piece on *Defense News*, Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen identified three key challenges for current and future generations of Singaporeans, particularly in the area of defence and security:

- **"Disease X":** We must learn from the gaps and systemic inadequacies the current COVID-19 pandemic exposed and ready ourselves for "Disease X", which experts caution would eventually emerge. Nevertheless, one silver lining is that the rapid vaccine technology that was developed during this time would prove useful for future pandemics.
- **US-China strategic competition:** The Indo-Pacific could become the stage where tensions and disagreements between the US and China play out. There is increasing militarisation in Asia, with the US shifting the focus of its military presence to Asia and increasing defence spending by the US and China. However, the Biden administration could move the relationship away from conflict towards cooperation.
- **Climate change:** While militaries are not usually seen as first responders to climate emergencies, this is a "structural gap". Militaries must build up capabilities to deal with the adverse effects of climate change, in the same way that they deal with non-traditional threats. In recent years, **Singapore and ASEAN have been redoubling efforts to strengthen Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) coordination**

such as with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) and the Changi Regional HADR Coordination Centre (RHCC).

“In the 20th century, a generation survived two world wars, established norms and created institutions to bring peace and progress for the ensuing 70 years. We, who are fortunate to enjoy the fruits of their labour and sacrifice, must now deal with the great threats of the 21st century. It’s up to us to maintain the peace for this generation.”

– Minister Ng in his op-ed on 12 Jan

On 20 Jan, at the inaugural Temasek Shophouse Conversation, DPM Heng Swee Keat said there are three fundamentals that will strengthen Singapore and the world’s ability to tackle “Disease X”.



- **Expand science and technology capabilities**, even during an economic downturn. The rapid speed at which COVID-19 test kits, contact tracing, and vaccines were developed was key in supporting Singapore’s pandemic response.
- **Improve global cooperation**. Countries need to learn from the lessons of COVID-19 to improve information sharing and cooperation in order to respond more swiftly in the next pandemic.
- **Strengthen society’s response**. He said that society must continue to remain vigilant, adapt to the unexpected, and build resilience as a community for the next pandemic.

[Sources: Defense News, 12 Jan; CNA, 20 Jan]

4. AL-ULA AGREEMENT AND THE QATAR EMBARGO

On 5 Jan, at Al-Ula in Saudi Arabia, leaders of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states signed the Al-Ula Agreement, which restored diplomatic relations and ended the three-and-a-half year air, land, and sea embargo against Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt.. The Al-Ula Agreement covers three areas: reopening the Saudi-Qatari border and lifting the airspace restrictions, Qatar’s withdrawal of the legal claims that it submitted to international tribunals, and agreement for national and regional media outlets to tone down negative campaigns.



What was the blockade of Qatar about?

On 5 June 2017, the Arab countries cut ties with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism.

- **Qatar acknowledged providing assistance to Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood** but denied that it aided jihadist groups like al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.
- **Qatar refused to accept the 13 conditions for ending the embargo**, which included closing media outlet Al Jazeera and downgrading diplomatic tie with Iran, insisting that it would not “surrender” its sovereignty and that this “blockade” violated international law.
- **Qatar managed to tide over the economic shock** by rapidly restructuring trade routes, creating new supply chains, increasing local agricultural and manufacturing capacity, and expanding relations with Turkey and Iran.

[Sources: BBC, 5 Jan; Washington Post, 8 Jan]

5. US CAPITOL RIOTS AND REACTIONS IN SINGAPORE

On 6 Jan, the United States Capitol building in Washington D.C. was besieged by President Donald Trump’s supporters, who broke into the building in an attempt to overturn the results of the November 2020 Presidential Election.

Leaders in Singapore expressed their dismay at the events, with SM Teo Chee Hean calling it “a sad day” with the destruction of public order and safety in the Capitol. Speaker of the Parliament, Tan Chuan Jin, highlighted the importance of respecting due process and the rule of law.

[Source: CNA, 7 Jan]

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Every society is subject to the same dynamics and pressures. We all need to reflect on how we wish to approach this discourse in our respective societies.
– Tan Chuan Jin in a Facebook post on 6 Jan

[Any feedback on this issue? Let us know through <https://go.gov.sg/feedbacknif>, or email us at nexus@defence.gov.sg.]

