

# 'It is in Germany's interest to be present'

How to establish stability in the Indo-Pacific



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**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG:** As a former surgical oncologist and now Minister for Defence, what are your views on the implications of COVID-19 for traditional concepts of international security?

**NG ENG HEN:** From a public-health perspective, COVID-19 would be rated as a middle-tier challenge. Most experts, either medical or from the defence arena, would objectively conclude that the world is ill-prepared for a global biological threat. This unpreparedness is not only tragic, but dangerous. This is not a consequence of a lack of technology or communications, but the absence of political will and organization. The cost of this unprepared-

ness – the absence of consensus and unity, is the loss of human lives on an enormous scale.

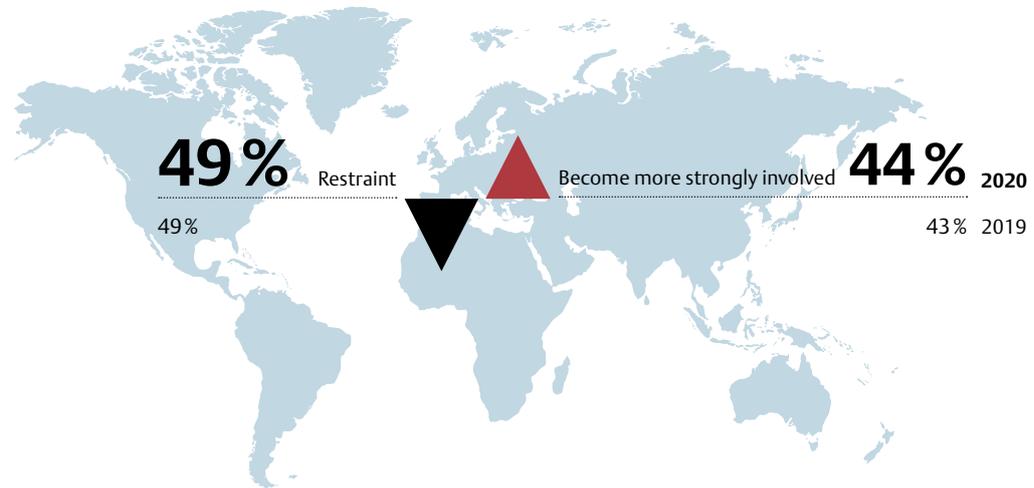
COVID-19 has also shown the global system up from a security perspective in many ways. First, it has shown up interdependencies and the integrity of supply lines. Earlier on, many nations including Singapore were scrambling for essentials. This led to a situation where many countries had to recalculate their interdependencies and supply chains because its disruption exposed vulnerabilities.

Second, nativist tendencies – the tendencies to protect your own tribe in times of stress, whether it is through the securing of essential supplies, test kits, medicine or vaccines – are on the rise, which can lead to division.

The third aspect is an accentuation of outcomes across social-economic classes within and across countries. Minorities have higher infection and mortality rates. There will also be differences in effects of COVID-19 on developed economies as opposed to emerging and undeveloped economies. The issue of debt and debt servicing post-COVID-19 will also have the potential to cascade security challenges. Emerging economies will not have that kind of wherewithal to deal with debt as the developed countries have.

The fourth and most damaging factor for security which COVID-19 showed us is the absence of global

**International responsibility: Should Germany become more strongly involved in international crises?**



2020: don't know 5%, no answer 2% | 2019: don't know 5%, no answer 3%

leadership and consensus in this crisis. The world missed an opportunity for multilateralism to strengthen amidst this crisis and this will work into the psyche of countries post-COVID-19. The longer the crisis, the stronger these forces will exert to re-configure the existing stable systems and affect international security.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Germany and Singapore are both middle powers though in different regions of the world. Where do you see joint challenges and potential for deepening cooperation?**

**NG ENG HEN:** Nowhere in our history or in our projections do we think that we will have the influence that Germany has. But let me answer your question generically. COVID-19 has shown us that it is impossible for any country to withdraw itself from the global economy without suffering consequences.

Singapore Airlines recently announced that it will have to cut its total workforce by 4,300 staff positions for the reason that business has dropped by 95 percent. It is in the interest of all countries, especially smaller ones, to strengthen multilat-

eralism, to keep what I described as the forces that COVID-19 unearthed – the protectionist policies, the nativist policies and the parochial policies – at bay. The COVAX initiative is a good example of multilateral efforts borne out of an enlightened mindset.

We must also strengthen existing platforms. They are not perfect – whether it is the WHO or the UN. But it seems to me quite regressive to weaken these platforms at a time when you need them most. This also applies to military ties that we have built up over the years. We need to maintain them, and not let COVID-19 weaken them. For Singapore and Germany, we are deepening cooperation in submarine training, defence-technology collaboration and cyber defence.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: China's rise marks a significant change to the post-Cold War order. From a Singaporean view, how stable is the current order in the Indo-Pacific region?**

**NG ENG HEN:** Let me address the question from two perspectives. The first perspective is what happened in the early 2000s, post 9/11. Both the United States' and Europe's economies were flagging, and it was

China's growth that was beneficial, not only to Asia, but globally. The second perspective would be to ask the question in reverse – would the world be better off with a 'failed China' or even a less successful one?

When China entered the WTO, the hope was that integrating China with the liberal world order would facilitate the opening of China. And if you look at where the position is now, the question to ask is, are we dealing with a problem of success, or a problem of failure? From my perspective, it is a problem of success. Some might say that we should not have allowed China to enter the WTO. But if China had been kept out of the global system, continued to be an autarky for example, it would not have grown as fast, but neither would it have a vested interest to uphold the global system. As part of this system, China needs a stable and progressing United States, EU, ASEAN and Australasia to grow alongside it. The interdependency is virtuous. However, thinking of China without the Chinese Communist Party at its helm is wishful thinking for the next millennium, and we ought to be asking ourselves where the landing points are.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: How do you see Germany's role in Asia? Is Germany contributing enough to security in the Indo-Pacific region?**

**NG ENG HEN:** Singapore will be happy to facilitate Germany's presence in this region. As the world's fourth-largest economy, it is in Germany's interest to be present. And Germany has taken positive steps by deploying an International Liaison Officer to the Information Fusion Centre, which looks out for maritime security. I am aware of the mandate, the preoccupations of your military, and obviously, the German military has its hands full dealing

with NATO security, dealing with Europe. Yet it is in Germany's interest to be present here. It is a very strong relationship that Singapore shares with Germany and we want to continue to strengthen it.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: Against the background of increasing tensions between China and the United States, will countries such as Germany or Singapore be forced to take a side?**

**NG ENG HEN:** Theoretically, if the contestation heats up and the stakes go up, at some point, it will be inevitable for countries to take sides. Right now, it is the decoupling of technology. The day when countries – whether it is Singapore, Germany, or any other country – have to choose to take a side, all of us lose, including the United States and China. It may be justified internally by their security considerations, but I doubt this is the system countries would prefer. There are many global problems that can only be dealt with decisively when you have consensus.

**KÖRBER-STIFTUNG: As Germany and Singapore are both highly dependent on international trade, what lessons can Germany learn from Singapore in terms of navigating these tensions?**

**NG ENG HEN:** I hesitate for a small country to give a big country advice – that is not in our DNA. Singapore is far more dependent on connectivity and international trade than Germany. We are like a shop in the airport – when the airport shuts down, there is no business. We are also not a manufacturing hub like Germany. We are however well-diversified and services is a much larger component of GDP. But as with Germany, we need connectivity to thrive. If you disconnect us from that ecosystem of connectivity and mobility, our economy, and I think our ethos, will shrivel. 