
Government Foresight

Integrating Foresight into Policy: Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning in Singapore

Interview with

| **Lock Pin CHEW**, Director, Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS) Programme Office, National Security Coordination Secretariat, Prime Minister's Office, Singapore

1. Kathrin Brockmann: Mr. Chew, you are directing the Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning Programme Office of Singapore (RPO). In January 2012, the RAHS programme was reorganized into three constituent centres, (1) the Think Centre, (2) the Solutions Centre and (3) the Experimentation Centre. What is the rationale behind this three-pronged approach?

Lock Pin Chew: Prior to the reorganization, the RAHS Programme Office (RPO) was organized as: (1) the Horizon Scanning Centre (HSC) and (2) the RAHS Experimentation Centre (REC). Then, we defined HSC's role as the systematic examination of potential threats, opportunities and likely future developments that would have a significant impact on Singapore.

While this mandate has not changed, we have re-organized HSC into two organizations consisting of the RAHS Think

Centre and the RAHS Solutions Centre. By doing this, we have a clearer definition of roles for each centre, and a better organization construct for competency development.

Each centre's function is distinct. The *RAHS Think Centre* excites policy makers with insights to emerging risks and opportunities through thought-provoking publications. The *RAHS Solutions Centre* enables policy makers in strategic anticipation by supporting their decision-making with foresight processes and training. The *RAHS Experimentation Centre* experiments with foresight processes and technologies and builds them into the RAHS system. Together, the three centers work to fulfill RPO's mission to enhance policy-making capabilities through engaging analyses, robust processes and leading-edge systems.

2. Brockmann: In general, what are institutional parameters that are conducive

to conducting foresight? What works well in your current institutional set-up?

Chew: The key institutional parameter enabling foresight is top-level support. We are fortunate to have many senior leaders who believe in foresight and make special efforts to motivate it. As a result, robust organizational and decision-making structures have been instituted within the Singapore Government to enable inter-ministerial sharing and collaboration for policy making in foresight.

3. Brockmann: What would you say are the most significant challenges in your everyday foresight work?

Chew: One of the most significant challenges is to get buy-in for foresight work. While many are convinced that futures work is important and useful, many are simply too caught up with the here-and-now to work on foresight. We have found that having the right project, one that is highly relevant, and in addition having management support is extremely useful in helping push the foresight agenda. Only when bosses are convinced about the project will they dedicate resources to it.

However, there is a risk in this approach and that is cognitive bias. Many foresight ideas are by nature counter-intuitive and will not be supported by mainstream policy makers. At times, we realized that we have to push through alternative ideas that run against the grain of the mainstream. For such ideas, top leadership's support is imperative.

4. Brockmann: Translating foresight into policy seems to be a challenge many countries are struggling with. What would you say are the unique selling points,

whenever convincing policymakers of the necessity and value-added of your work?

Chew: A foresight technique and system that works is key to convincing policy makers of the value of our work. This must be borne out in good products in the form of our publications, and also in the usefulness of our techniques and systems through the workshops we conduct. We have had many converts from workshops that started out sceptical about our techniques, but they found it useful after using them and applying them to their problems. They are the ones who spread the word about the effectiveness of foresight.

Having a technological system, like our RAHS system, will also help reduce the general workload and cognitive overload in big data analysis, making foresight more amenable to policy makers. But we have to constantly fashion these tools in our system to make them useful.

5. Brockmann: With the work of your RAHS Solutions Centre you aim at bringing foresight right into government institutions and the heart of decision-making. How exactly do you do that?

Chew: We do this in a number of ways. First, we engage government agencies by conducting trainings on environmental scanning, as well as familiarizing them with various foresight methodologies that RPO uses.

Second, we also engage with various agencies on specific projects. Some of these include projects with the Housing Development Board and Ministry of National Development on housing sentiment, and the Ministry of Education on student centric meritocracy.

Third, we are always on the lookout for new methodologies that work on translating foresight to policy. For example, we are currently looking at using policy games that allow

policy makers to gain a more nuanced understanding of emerging landscapes, as well as to test strategies in a safe-to-fail environment. Policy gaming is an excellent way to familiarize policy makers with the emerging issues and get them started on working out solutions.

6. Brockmann: Part of your engagement with policy makers is training and capacity-building. What are the most important skills policy makers and analysts should possess? And what are the contents that you train? How long does it take to become foresight proficient?

Chew: To lift up the overall competency levels of foresight in the Singapore Government, we need to build foresight competencies in foresight practitioners, as well as in our policy-makers.

To distinguish them, by “foresight practitioners”, I mean RPO staff and staff of other foresight agencies such as the Centre of Strategic Futures of the Public Service Division, whose sole function is to motivate foresight developments. “Policy makers” on the other hand, are people who work in units such as strategic planning branches and who use foresight tools to help them in forward planning.

To train our foresight practitioners, we have identified competencies such as “Critical Thinking”, “Information Gathering and Distilling”, “Policy Thinking”, “Creative Communications”, “Training and Facilitation”, and “Knowledge of Futures Methodologies” under our competency

development framework. They reflect the nature of the job, which requires our people to be able to wield the tools of foresight effectively, and be able to communicate new ideas to people.

To train policy makers, we focus on two distinct tracts. The first is environmental scanning. Here, we aim to equip agencies with the skills necessary to conduct independent horizon scanning and insight development. These courses are conducted in workshop-style for about 20 – 30 officers at a time. The second training track that we have is called foresight-to-strategy, where workshop participants are introduced to the various RAHS methodologies that are used to develop future scenarios and “wind-tunnel” strategies. For the foresight-to-strategy series, we usually engage agencies on a specific topic of interest.

7. Brockmann: Are there examples of projects you have successfully carried out in close cooperation with government agencies? Have you also been engaged in cross-departmental projects?

Chew: We work with various local and international policy and foresight units on our projects. Many of them are cross-departmental efforts. Recently, we have worked with the Institute of Policy Studies from the National University of Singapore on a project looking at the future of Singaporean society in 2022. In this project, we engaged the Singapore populace in an interactive discussion, facilitated through an “immersive arts” process to distil their views on how they want to be governed in 2022. This project was very useful to get Singaporeans thinking about the future and familiarizing them with future challenges. We have also worked with many international agencies. Such engagements

are very useful to help us gain an international perspective on issues. Projects in this regard are wide-ranging. We have worked with Interpol on a specific topic of “Cybercrime”, with the Rockefeller Foundation on “cross-cutting issues affecting the poor and vulnerable communities”, and currently we will be working with the US Atlantic Council on the topic “Technology and Society”.

8. Brockmann: Creating networks and promoting exchange among relevant actors plays a significant role in your work. What are vehicles for fostering ties within the foresight community in Singapore?

Chew: The most useful platform for engagement is through dedicated projects, especially when they are tasked from the leadership. Next is through our training courses, which are often a lead-in to ground-up project ideas. People will come for our training courses, and when they find that the tools are useful, they will consider moving one step further to work with us on a project.

Working through the RAHS system is also important. When they find our RAHS system useful, they may also request accounts. Our Experimentation Centre is also constantly making improvements and additions to our RAHS suite of tools after understanding their needs. From time to time, we will roll out tools to help them with their foresight processes. All these help build up and foster the foresight community within the Singapore Government.

An important platform we use to build ties with both local and international foresight practitioners is through our International Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning Symposium (IRAHSS) that is held every 18-months. During this event, we invite a whole

range of speakers from across the globe to share their insights with more than 300 local and international participants. The next symposium is in July of this year and the theme for the symposium is “Strategic Foresight, Actionable Policies”.

9. Brockmann: You have mentioned the RAHS software platform which supports your work. What are the benefits, limitations and prospects of using information and communication technologies in foresight work?

Chew: The RAHS suite of software tools was created to support decision and policy making processes throughout the Singapore government. We use technology as an enabler for foresight.

Leveraging on emerging data analytics software that can be used to harvest and make sense of large amounts of data, the tool helps analysts sieve through copious amounts of data to distill insights. With useful visualization, we can help analysts better present ideas to decision-makers. Using the modeling tools in RAHS, foresight practitioners have an aide to help them better map-out, externalize, and capture considerations, insights, policy ideas, and decisions. They use it as a collaborative tool to create a shared understanding about the issues at stake. Such discussions are systematically stored, and retrievable for reference in the future. The RAHS tools are key to help us institutionalize our foresight work and processes.

However, foresight techniques and tools are still new to many people, and these people need to be taught about their utility. Hence, the main challenge is training people on the use of such tools and educating them about related processes.

10. Brockmann: Looking into the future, what is your vision for foresight in Singapore and the work of the RAHS Programme Office?

Chew: My vision for foresight in Singapore is one where foresight becomes second nature in government, and even in society. Our RAHS tools will become the “Microsoft Office” for foresight work. Our RAHS tools are found on portable devices, such as tablets and smartphones, where people from government and society use them to actively engage in constructive conversations about Singapore’s future.

Kathrin Brockmann works in the Future Analysis Section of the Bundeswehr Planning Office. She is currently seconded as a fellow to the stiftung neue verantwortung where she is head of the project “Government Foresight”.

| Lock Pin Chew



Lock Pin Chew leads the Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS) Programme Office, which is part of the National Security Coordination Secretariat, Prime Minister's Office. A Naval Officer by vocation, Colonel Lock Pin Chew held appointments as Office Director, and Head of the Command Post of the Future with the Future Systems Directorate, which worked on future operating concepts for the Singapore Armed Forces. Trained in computer and physical sciences - Knowledge Engineering by the National University of Singapore (MTEch), and Physics by Imperial College, London, Lock Pin held a 6-year stint as Division Manager with the Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA), leading Command and Control Systems developments. His work in DSTA had won the Singapore Defence Technology Prize. Lock Pin also had the opportunity to Command one of Singapore Navy's first missile-armed craft, RSS SEA LION.

| The RAHS Programme Office



The Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS) programme was launched in 2004, as part of the National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS). The RAHS program explores methods and tools that complement scenario planning in anticipating strategic issues with significant possible impact on Singapore. With the help of our international partners, as well as through experimentation, the RAHS Programme has today developed an extensive range of processes that enabled agencies to collect, analyse, inform, model and monitor emerging strategic issues. These processes are supported by a wide range of products that enable analysts to better perform their roles. This includes the RAHS software platform which is specifically designed and developed with capabilities to support research and analysis using information extraction and visualisation, modelling and survey tools. Since 2007, we have also regularly produced information products such as SKAN and Vanguard. Armed with the processes and products, the RAHS team has been actively engaging government agencies, academic institutions and international partners through training, consultancy and joint projects. These projects generally explored emerging issues with the aim of enhancing strategic anticipation capabilities for the agencies.

| About the Government Foresight Project

Acting strategically is one of governments' key tasks. However, planning and implementing future-oriented policy is particularly challenging due to the multitude of stakeholders, the growing interdependence between different policy areas and the wide spectrum of dynamic developments. Examples such as the Arab Spring and the global financial crisis illustrate that decision makers (including their advisors and critical commentators) are often taken by surprise and are not well prepared to deal with such developments. Against this background strategic foresight is gaining importance for government institutions at the federal level. The project **Government Foresight** seeks to develop proposals for enhancing strategic foresight at the federal level of the German state. To that end, structured interviews serve as vehicles to explore ideas of renowned experts as well as approaches and best practices in other countries and organizations and to generate **Impulses** for further developing **Government Foresight** in Germany.

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