



CRISIS: More Than a Moment

COVID-19 and How to Respond to Types of Crises as They Unfold

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Abstract

Crises do not unfold in a single form. Some emerge as sudden shocks requiring immediate containment, while others evolve more fluidly as they become entangled with background domestic pressures. At the furthest end of the spectrum are fully convergent crises, which generate prolonged and simultaneous strains across multiple systems. Using Singapore's crisis history since independence, this paper develops a typology of sudden, fluid, and convergent crises to examine how different forms of disruption place distinct demands on governance. It positions the typology as a diagnostic tool for recognising shifts in crisis form, and argues that crisis resilience depends also on recalibrating policy capacities accordingly.

COVID-19: A Generational Jolt, and Guide

Singapore raised its Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) level to Orange on 17 February 2020, moving its national emergency response levels up a crucial notch. By evening, supermarket shelves emptied as food, masks, thermometers, and toilet paper were snapped up. Social media posts of frenzied queues of shoppers with fully-laden trolleys spread, and news – real and rumoured – moved faster than official updates could.

In response, the government moved quickly to reassure the public. Former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong delivered televised addresses, while other public figures posted on social media images of warehouses stocked with rice and other essential foods, as well as medical supplies. Yet, these reassurances also revealed the limits of foresight: those reserves were meant for roughly six months of contingency and intended for the health sector, not a nation suddenly needing 170 million masks a month.¹

Every generation faces a defining crisis. For Singapore, COVID-19 was that test – one that stretched the limits of national preparedness, resilience, and institutional trust.

What unfolded in 2020 was not just a health emergency, but a complex, multi-dimensional problem with no clear solutions or a foreseeable endpoint. Each policy decision involved significant trade-offs: lockdowns reduced transmission but disrupted livelihoods; border controls safeguarded public health but stranded migrant workers and separated families; social distancing measures preserved order but strained mental well-being and overall community life. Over time, Singapore recalibrated and eventually moved toward endemic living – a status that reflected pragmatic acceptance more than triumph.

COVID-19, the deadliest of three public health crises Singapore has battled in the last two decades,² was both sudden and slow-burning. While its arrival was abrupt, its effects accumulated over time, disrupting supply chains and reshaping everyday behaviour and impacting public trust. While it drew on lessons from earlier outbreaks such as SARS, MERS, and H1N1, its scale and complexity surpassed earlier crisis templates and planning assumptions. It underscored how the crises of today rarely fit into neat categories anymore. They overlap, compound, and converge.

¹ Kee-Tai Goh et al., “Epidemiology and Control of SARS in Singapore,” *Annals Academy of Medicine Singapore* 35, no. 5 (May 2006): 310, <https://www.annals.edu.sg/pdf/35VolNo5200606/V35N5p301.pdf>; Sue-Ann Chia, ed., *Behind the Mask: Our Healthcare Story* (Singapore: Ministry of Health; Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore, 2023), 30.

² Singapore confronted three major public health crises in recent decades: SARS in 2003, which claimed 33 lives; the H1N1 influenza outbreak between 2009 and 2010; and COVID-19 from 2020 to 2022. Other outbreaks, including MERS and limited H1N1 variants, were comparatively contained. *Ibid.*, 25.

Crisis Types: Sudden, Fluid, Convergent

Crises do not take a single form. Some erupt as sudden shocks that demand immediate action; others evolve more fluidly, entangling with underlying domestic pressures within the broader context in which they unfold. The heightened duration (i.e. how long it lasts), scope (i.e. what domains it spills over into or overloads), and depth of impact (i.e. necessitating policy adaptations or fundamental reviews) transform a fluid crisis into a convergent one. In Singapore's experience, crises of all kinds have shaped how the state responds and adapts.

This essay draws on Singapore's past crises experience, surveying key episodes to distill lessons for the present and future. Singapore's crisis milestones point to three broad types of crisis:

- **sudden crises**, which are discrete and time-bound;
- **fluid crises**, where sudden shocks become entangled with underlying background pressures; and
- **convergent crises**, which overwhelm sectoral boundaries altogether. COVID-19 was such a case, cutting across public health, economic stability, and social cohesion.

Each crisis leaves a distinct imprint on policy and public memory, rendering it important to identify which mechanisms worked, which fell short, and which state capacities should be sustained or enhanced. Examining these episodes through a historical lens and through a crisis typology offers insights into how the state adjusts and responds, and how Singapore might prepare for a crisis that arrives quickly but spills into multiple domains of governance and society.

The Wider Context: Background Pressures

No crisis occurs in a vacuum, and no two are the same. Each emerges against a backdrop of domestic pressures that shape both its severity and the state's room for manoeuvre. These underlying conditions must therefore be considered in any analysis of how crises evolve and are managed. In Singapore's case, its position as a small, open, survival-oriented city-state means that long-standing background pressures – demographic, environmental, socio-economic, digital, and spatial – are ever-present (see Table 1). These background pressures are not crises *in themselves*, but structural conditions that shape how crises are experienced and governed. What varies, therefore, is not their existence, but the extent to which a given crisis becomes entangled with them.

These pressures develop cumulatively and are often somewhat foreseeable. They require longer-term planning, sustained investment, political will, and public

consent rather than reactive emergency measures. Resource and environmental constraints, demographic shifts, labour market volatility, digital vulnerabilities, and urban pressures evolve gradually, but shape nearly every domain of policymaking. While they lack the abruptness of sudden crises, they exert continuous pressure on institutions and public trust. When sudden shocks intersect with these pressures, risks are amplified and recovery becomes more complex.

Table 1: Background Pressures

<p><u>Key Features</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cumulative, slow-burn, somewhat predictable • Develops through gradual shifts in demographic, environmental, digital, or socio-economic conditions • Managed through anticipatory planning; policy foresight, sustained investment, political will, public consent, and contingency frameworks <p><u>Examples</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource and environmental constraints: Water and food security; climate mitigation and adaptation; energy transition • Demographic and social dynamics: Population ageing; inequality, social stratification; multicultural cohesion; mental health; intergenerational value shifts • Economic and labour market volatility: Job obsolescence; productivity limits; cost-of-living; housing affordability; foreign labour calibration • Digital stresses: Cybersecurity; data resilience; online polarisation • Urban and spatial pressures: Land scarcity; ageing infrastructure; urban liveability trade-offs <p><u>Implications</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural, often irreversible socio-economic impact • Reputational risks to governance and international standing • Increasing fiscal, generational pressures • Persistent strain on social trust, cohesion
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Keeping these background forces in mind, it becomes possible to delve deeper into the three distinct types of crisis (see Table 2). While these are theoretically discrete, in practice they exist along a spectrum that complicates both interpretation and response, an ambiguity this essay seeks to clarify for policy practitioners.

Sudden shocks are crises that arrive without warning, often triggered by external events or failures beyond immediate control. Socio-political spillovers that ignite racial unrest, stock market crashes, and civil emergencies happen without warning, exposing weaknesses in social security, fiscal systems, and physical infrastructure. These contingencies demand speed before certainty: sufficient operational resources, rapid coordination, clear communication, and an ability to improvise on the ground. The aftermath of each episode also leaves marks in the form of clearer inter-agency procedures, strengthened emergency services, and sometimes new laws. Singapore's response to such shocks therefore prioritises execution over deliberation, relying on established crisis protocols rather than extended policy design.

Crisis do not fit neatly in this category, and in reality the boundary between sudden shocks and the wider context of domestic background pressures is often more porous. Two patterns explain this fluidity. First, a crisis may start as a sudden event but quickly collide with background pressures. The 1964 racial riots, for instance, intersected with socio-demographic pressures and segmented communal structures in the final years of Singapore's union with Malaya, forcing rapid socio-political containment and a reassessment of Singapore's security governance. Second, domestic background pressures may only command urgent attention once they crystallise into

an acute incident. The gaps in public health infrastructure were exposed by the SARS outbreak, while cyber risks tend to build quietly until a visible breach affects the wider population, as seen in the 2018 Singhealth data breach incident.

These are **fluid crises** – events that blur typological boundaries, but ultimately remain within manageable parameters. They are:

- (i) **episodic**, with a relatively discernible endpoint;
- (ii) **contained**, generating stress or spillover with some societal disruption, but largely manageable within existing institutional capacities; and
- (iii) **incremental**, impactful enough to nudge policy or institutional improvements short of triggering fundamental shifts in institutions or national routines.³

Civil disasters like the 1986 Hotel New World collapse were episodic and contained, yet nudged policy improvements such as the 1989 Building Control Act and stricter regulatory oversight. Similarly, post-SARS enhancements to hospital isolation capacity and disease surveillance strengthened preparedness but remained incremental, stopping short of a fundamental overhaul of Singapore's public health governance framework.

Institutional learning strengthens the state's capacity to manage recurring types of crisis. While no two crisis are identical, later episodes of a similar nature are typically met with greater speed, operational coordination, and overall confidence. The 1969 racial riots were contained more decisively than those in 1964, and the response to the Nicoll Highway collapse was markedly faster and more technically sophisticated than the Hotel New World disaster nearly two decades earlier. In such cases, these episodes are less likely to be classified as fluid crises. Prior institutional learning enables the state to contain the shock more effectively, limiting its interaction with existing background pressures. Improved response capacity reduces spillover rather than altering the fundamental nature of the crisis itself.

Convergent crises are fluid crises that cross a threshold of heightened duration, scope, and depth of impact. They combine the characteristics of sudden shocks and background pressures in ways that overwhelm primary domain responses beyond that of a typical fluid crisis. Fully convergent crises tend to be:

- (i) **protracted**, unfolding (or escalating) over extended periods of uncertainty with no clear endpoint;
- (ii) **overloading**, generating simultaneous and compounding strain across multiple domains and systems; and
- (iii) **transformative**, forcing policy or institutional reconfigurations and governance logics that outlast the crisis period.

COVID-19 illustrates how a fluid crisis can mature into a convergent one. What began as a public health emergency rapidly cascaded across other domains, disrupting

³ Some institutional changes are instituted, but not to the extent of reshaping core governance logics or foundational policies. These crises mostly refine – not redefine – the existing system.

labour markets, global supply chains, and social cohesion. This multi-domain pressure exposed tight couplings across systems often governed separately, where vulnerabilities in one area could jeopardise the stability of others.

Consequently, governing COVID-19 moved beyond intensified emergency response toward a policy model of reflexive, long-term stewardship. In the absence of a clear “end-state”, policymakers had to balance immediate protection with longer-term renewal. Public compliance could not be sustained through enforcement alone; ultimately, it depended heavily on institutional trust, fatigue management, and an overall tolerance for uncertainty. The eventual shift to endemic living as the “new normal” reflected pragmatic accommodation rather than decisive resolution. This marked a shift in operating assumptions, distinguishing COVID-19 as a convergent crisis instead of an episodic one that can be contained or brought to closure.

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Table 2: Crisis Typology

SUDDEN SHOCKS

Key Features

- **Discrete, abrupt**, largely unanticipated as often triggered by discrete events beyond institutional control or oversight
- Onset unfolds rapidly with little lead time; demands swift decision-making, mobilisation, and communication
- Localised or sector-specific scope; managed by relatively clear operational lead agencies and crisis protocol

Examples

- **Socio-political:** 1969 Racial Riots
- **Economic:** 1985 “Pan-Electric” Stock Market Crash
- **Civil disasters:** 2000 SQ006 Flight Crash; 2004 Nicoll Highway Disaster
- **Terrorism:** 1974 Laju Ferry Incident
- **Environmental:** 2015 SEA Regional Haze; domestic flash floods

Implications

- Some immediate socio-economic dislocation and public anxiety
- Localised or sector-specific impact on services and supply chains
- Rapid activation of emergency logistics and contingency plans
- Heightened need for short-cycle public communication for stabilisation and reassurance
- Transition relatively quickly from response to recovery

If discrete shock becomes entangled with domestic background pressures

FLUID CRISES

Fluid crises blur the line between sudden shocks and the wider context. They may start as discrete shocks that evolve in complexity and reach as they interact with domestic background pressures, or arise when long-standing structural pressures materialise at a tipping point, making them harder to resolve

Key Features

- **Episodic** - has a relatively discernible endpoint
- **Contained** - generates some stress/ spillover some societal disruption, yet remain largely manageable within existing institutional capacities
- **Incremental** - nudges policy/ institutional improvements short of deep structural change

Examples

- **Socio-political:** 1964 Racial Riots; 1971 British Withdrawal
- **Economic:** 1970s Oil Crises; 1980s Financial Crises (FC); 1997 Asian FC; 2008 Global FC
- **Civil disasters:** 1986 Hotel New World Collapse

Implications

- Governing response now extends beyond initial shock phase
- Some cross-domain spillover necessitating inter-agency coordination across economic, social, political institutions
- Longer and blurred transition from response to recovery, requires sustained communication and policy calibration to deal with extended uncertainty
- Nudges institutional learning; responses are revised or improved upon

If there is heightened duration, scope and depth of impact

CONVERGENT CRISES

Convergent crises occur when long-standing domestic background pressures have built up to the point that a triggering shock exposes and aligns multiple vulnerabilities, leading to protracted system-wide disruptions, as seen with COVID-19 as a defining “crisis of our generation”

Key features

- **Protracted** - unfolding (or escalating) over long periods of uncertainty, no clear endpoint
- **Overloading** - simultaneous and compounding strain across multiple domains and systems, generating wide and sustained societal disruption
- **Transformative** - forces policy/ institutional reconfigurations, governance logics that outlast crisis periods

Implications

- Disruptions to supply-chain, resource flows, economic systems, and social stability; exposing (over)dependencies and fragility
- Strains on public trust, institutional credibility and fiscal resilience, especially if responses are delayed or fragmented
- Requires integrated WOGWOS, cross-border, sometimes inter-generational policies
- Clear and consistent communication vital to maintain public trust in prolonged uncertainty
- Resilience relies on shared “crisis mindset”; preparedness as a civic norm not a reactionary response

Characteristics of Crisis Transition: Fluid to Convergent

- **Foreseeable Duration:** *Episodic → Protracted*
- **Scope of Strain:** *Contained → Overloading*
- **Depth of Impact (policy-wise):** *Incremental → Transformative*

Taken together, these categories offer a way to understand how crises unfold in Singapore. Sudden shocks reveal how quickly systems can be stretched; fluid crises remind us that the line between the two archetypes is often porous or blurred when they interact with background pressures; and convergent crises show what happens when these pressures collide and grow in duration, scope, and depth. This typology is therefore less about classification than about clarity – a way to conceptualise where vulnerabilities lie, how crises escalate, and what kinds of responses different situations demand.

Historical Milestones: Sudden and Fluid Crises

This section maps the sudden and fluid crises that have shaped Singapore’s post-independence experience (see Graph 1). These episodes – ranging from socio-political ruptures, financial shocks, civil disasters, to environmental hazards – offer a clear view of how policy practitioners learn under pressure. **Sudden** or **fluid** crises are instructive precisely because they test institutional limits in real time, with decisions made under conditions of uncertainty and stress. Such crises mark clear inflection points; they stretch existing systems and compel policy adjustments. Studying these episodes shows how institutions adapt and how lessons are codified into governing capacity over time.

Graph 1: Timeline of Sudden/Fluid Crises

1964

RACIAL RIOTS

Two weeks of communal violence exposed the fragility of inter-ethnic relations of Singapore’s multiracial fabric. The state strengthened pre-emptive security measures, banned foreign-affiliated political parties, and institutionalised multiracialism into everyday governance through measures like Racial Harmony Day and the onward HDB Ethnic Integration Policy (1989).

1969

RACIAL RIOTS

Racial violence in Malaysia underscored Singapore’s vulnerability to neighbouring spillovers. Authorities deployed security arrangements put in place post-1964, curbed rumour-mongering, and reinforced intelligence-led internal security. This episode further institutionalised pre-emptive crisis management and community engagement measures to prevent ethnic escalation.

1970s

OIL CRISES

Global oil shocks exposed Singapore’s dependence on external energy supplies. Singapore responded through industrial upgrading, cementing petrochemicals and oil refining as strategic growth sectors. MAS implemented exchange rate centered monetary policy (1981), which stabilised inflationary pressures, embedding long-term resilience.

1971

BRITISH WITHDRAWAL

Britain's accelerated military withdrawal threatened Singapore's defence and economic stability, as British bases accounted for a major share of GDP and employment. It prompted rapid expansion of the Singapore Armed Forces, higher defence spending, deeper cooperation through the FPDA, and the conversion of former bases into economic assets while intensifying efforts to attract FDI.

1974

LAJU FERRY INCIDENT

Singapore's first terror attack prompted the creation of an integrated security framework and accelerated counter-terrorism capabilities. It led to the first intake of full-time Police National Servicemen (1975), laid the foundation for Whole-of-Government coordination, established the Executive Group (later HCEG) which became a model for future crisis management.

1980s

FINANCIAL CRISES: 1985 DOMESTIC RECESSION

A series of corporate and banking inefficiencies revealed structural weaknesses in Singapore's growth model and led to the first post-independence recession (1985). Policymakers introduced fiscal cost-cutting, CPF reforms, Skills Development Fund incentives, and privatisation measures. The Economic Committee (1985) recommended structural reforms, establishing long-term economic diversification and a more resilient private sector foundation.

1985

"PAN-ELECTRIC" STOCK MARKET CRASH

The collapse forced an unprecedented three-day SGX closure which exposed serious regulatory gaps in capital markets. This provided impetus to implement the Securities Industry Act (1986), tighten disclosure requirements, regulatory oversight, and ban forward trading as market resilience reforms.

1986

HOTEL NEW WORLD COLLAPSE

A structural failure killed multiple civilians, exposing weaknesses in construction oversight. Post-disaster reforms included the Building Control Act (1989), mandatory five-year maintenance checks, stricter standards, enhanced government supervision; a shift from reactive rescue to preventive regulation.

1991

SQ117 FLIGHT HIJACKING

The first hijacking of a Singapore Airlines flight on local soil tested counter-terrorism readiness. Responses included expanding specialised aviation units, codifying no-concessions policies, and tightening legal and operational frameworks for rapid crisis response in the air transport sector.

1997

ASIAN FINANCIAL CRISIS

Regional contagion threatened Singapore's open economy. Policymakers deployed fiscal stimulus, maintained exchange rate stability, and introduced financial oversight reforms under the Developmental State Model. Long-term measures included prudential regulation, capital buffer frameworks, and adaptation to emerging fintech and digital financial tools.

REGIONAL HAZE

One of the most severe haze episodes which disrupted public health, travel, and economic activity. Singapore established the ASEAN Haze Technical Task Force, and signed the Regional Agreement on Transboundary Haze (RHAP). Longer-term reforms included the legally-binding ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze (AATHP) and inter-ministerial coordination, laying a precedent for environmental crisis diplomacy.

2000

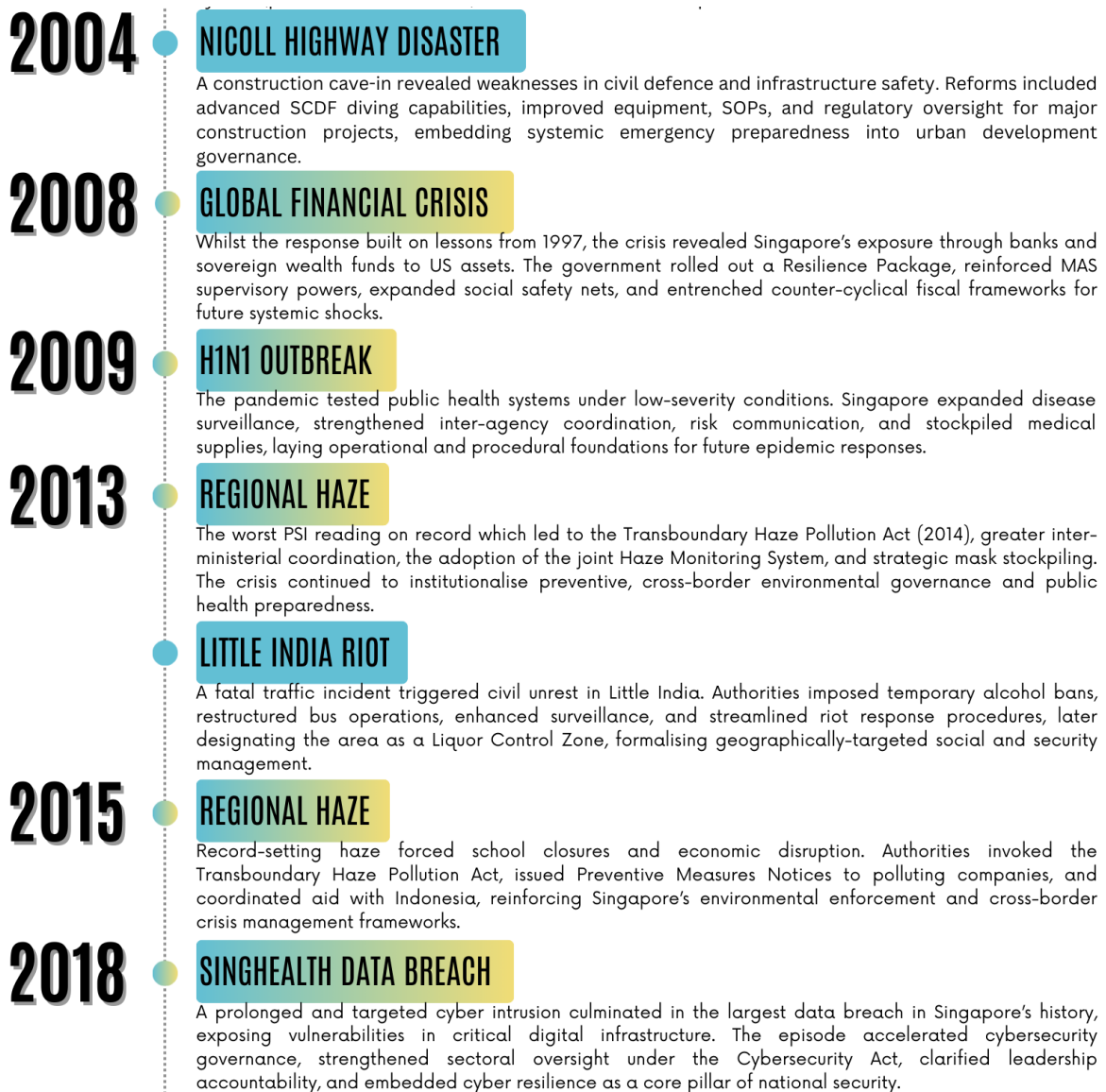
SQ006 FLIGHT CRASH

A runway collision in Taipei exposed gaps in aviation safety and crisis coordination. Singapore strengthened safety oversight, airport ground procedures, and inter-agency communication protocols, enhancing operational readiness for cross-border aviation incidents.

2003

SARS PANDEMIC

The outbreak highlighted gaps in public health preparedness. Singapore established dedicated taskforces, hospital-system epidemiology capacity, implemented SOPs for stockpiling, isolation and biosafety. Community measures, temperature screening, contact tracing, and a colour-coded alert system (precursor to DORSCON) became institutionalised practices.



Source: Compilation of crisis milestones based on multiple sources, including Singapore statutes, National Library Board archives, and secondary analyses (see bibliography for full references).

Charting crisis episodes across the decades reveals an evolution in Singapore's responses to sudden shocks – from a posture of survival to one of systematisation. In the 1960s and 1970s, the priority was basic stability: restoring order, ensuring food and water security, and forging a shared national identity post-separation. By the 1980s and 1990s, the focus shifted to stabilising the economy amid global volatility, refining fiscal instruments, and strengthening financial regulation. By the turn of the century, Singapore began confronting a new class of risks – cross-domain, technological, and interlinked in nature – where crises no longer remained confined to single sectors. The 2003 SARS outbreak, 2008 Global Financial Crisis, 2018 Singhealth data breach, and the reoccurring regional haze episodes illustrate how both the nature of crises and the state's responses have evolved.

In all, these episodes suggest a maturation of crisis management from reactive containment toward a more of anticipatory mode of governance, characterised by tighter inter-agency integration and iterative norm or institution-building. The

codification of lessons from different crises over history points to several enduring principles:

- 1) **Nationhood is forged through crisis.** Early socio-political shocks like the 1964 and 1969 racial riots and the 1965 separation were formative inflection points in Singapore's post-independence trajectory. These episodes shaped the state's early social architecture and left lasting imprints on policy direction. Multiracialism was institutionalised through the Housing Development Board's Ethnic Integration Policy, Racial Harmony Day, and civic education. These measures embedded a governing logic in which social cohesion is forged through policy design. This logic continues to inform approaches to urban planning and civic integration, embedding diversity as an enduring feature of Singaporean society.
- 2) **A dual-mode governance approach (reactive and anticipatory) remains vital.** Singapore's crisis responses often unfold in two stages. The first prioritises rapid stabilisation through immediate response and intervention, and the second turns to reform as the crisis catalyses a strengthening of policy frameworks and institutional resilience. This pattern is evident in economic shocks such as the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, where short-term relief packages deployed to restore confidence were paired with longer-term regulatory or supervisory reforms. The same logic extends beyond the economic domain. Civil disasters and public health crises similarly paired swift containment with institutional upgrades, reflective of Singapore's broader governing reflex.
- 3) **Capacity-building is charted through failure.** Disruptive security and civil incidents have repeatedly catalysed institutional strengthening. Initial responses prioritised containment and stabilisation, giving way to sector-specific structural upgrades in the longer-term. The 1974 Laju Ferry incident prompted the establishment of full-time Police National Service and formalised inter-agency crisis coordination; the 1986 Hotel New World collapse led to stricter building controls under the 1989 Building Control Act; and the 2004 Nicoll Highway disaster accelerated the professionalisation of the Singapore Civil Defence Force.
- 4) **Institutional learning and public trust are consolidated over time.** Singapore's governance gradually shifted from improvised coordination to more routine management across successive crises. The Whole-of-Government (WOG) approach, first stress-tested after the 1974 Laju Ferry incident, was refined through subsequent crises, producing clearer command structures, decision pathways, and norms for crisis communication. Over time, this consistency reduced public friction during crises. Repeated exposure to coordinated and competent responses has strengthened public trust, enabling higher levels of compliance and cooperation.

Each sudden crisis, though unique, adds a layer of institutional memory and collective learning, gradually transforming vulnerability into resilience. This accumulated experience shaped Singapore's response to COVID-19 – a convergent crisis that spilled over into public health, economic, and social domains, testing the limits of these systems of preparedness.

Convergent Crises: Evolving Response

COVID-19 marked a turning point in Singapore's crisis experience. It was not just a severe shock, but a fully convergent one – protracted in duration, unfolding over years before reaching endemic status; overloading in scope, placing simultaneous strain across multiple systems; and transformative in impact, overwhelming sector-specific responses which forced significant institutional reconfigurations and shifts in governance logics.

The crisis did not begin this way. COVID-19 emerged as a sudden public health shock, but quickly became entangled with domestic background pressures. An ageing population, with many living alone, strained social work and care systems. Public health infrastructure was not designed for prolonged quarantine and mass surveillance. Migrant worker dormitories, housing nearly one-third of the labour force, became sites of rapid transmission.⁴ What first appeared as a contained outbreak escalated sharply in April 2020, with the outbreak of large clusters in purpose-built dormitories that were ill-suited for distancing measures. This exposed a critical blind spot and necessitated the formation of dedicated taskforces to stabilise conditions. It took two task forces and four months for the dormitories to be declared clear in August that year.⁵

As the pandemic persisted, informational pressures compounded material, fiscal, and operational strains. Misinformation spread alongside the virus, fuelling fear, panic buying, and vaccine scepticism. Pseudo-scientific claims and anti-vaccination narratives muddied the infoscape, distracting the public from authoritative channels and complicating risk communication. The crisis thus expanded beyond epidemiology into social and psychological domains.

COVID-19 demonstrated why convergent crises cannot be managed through sector-specific playbooks. Earlier outbreaks such as SARS and H1N1, while disruptive, remained largely contained within the healthcare system. COVID-19 did not. Public health decisions reshaped labour markets, work and housing circumstances, border movement, and supply chains. Fiscal policy became inseparable from disease control. The systemic nature of the crisis required a multi-ministry taskforce and shift from single-hazard planning toward integrated, cross-domain coordination spanning health, labour, logistics, and communications. Trade-offs were unavoidable and decisions had to be made under persistent uncertainty.

⁴ Josephine Teo, "Should Standards in Foreign Worker Dormitories Be Raised?", *Facebook*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/100044581562681/posts/3665600290180906/>.

⁵ Chia, *Behind the Mask*, 97.

Unlike sudden or fluid crises, COVID-19 unfolded as a rolling one between 2020 and 2022. Healthcare systems designed for short surges had to operate continuously over months then years. Institutions such as the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), built after SARS, were quickly strained. Manpower pressures, particularly in nursing, became acute. Periods of stabilisation were followed by resurgence, notably during the Delta wave in 2021. Scientific understanding had to adapt to new variants. Governance oscillated between emergency response and longer-term stewardship. Tools such as DORSCON and tiered response frameworks became instruments of calibration instead of resolution. Public compliance to enforcement increasingly depended on public trust. Sustaining coherent policy messaging to ensure public confidence and fatigue management became as important as operational control. The eventual shift toward vaccination as the primary exit strategy reflected acceptance rather than triumph.⁶

Adaptive governance moved beyond ad hoc taskforces toward more durable arrangements. Coordination between government and society aligned agencies, employers, and communities. These were necessary reflexive adaptations to prolonged, cross-domain strain. The mass vaccination campaign illustrated this shift. Its success rested on the alignment of multiple capacities rather than any single intervention: (i) infrastructure was scaled through accessible vaccination sites; (ii) manpower was mobilised across healthcare professionals and trained support staff; (iii) strategy guided phased rollout and prioritisation of vulnerable groups; (iv) messaging was clear and sustained, reinforced by policy nimbleness; (v) technology supported scheduling and monitoring; and (vi) logistics underpinned the entire effort from procurement and transport to cold-chain storage, two-week buffer stockpiles and contingency planning amid volatile global supply. Together these six elements reflected the integrated deployment of policy capacities, which will be examined systematically in Section V.

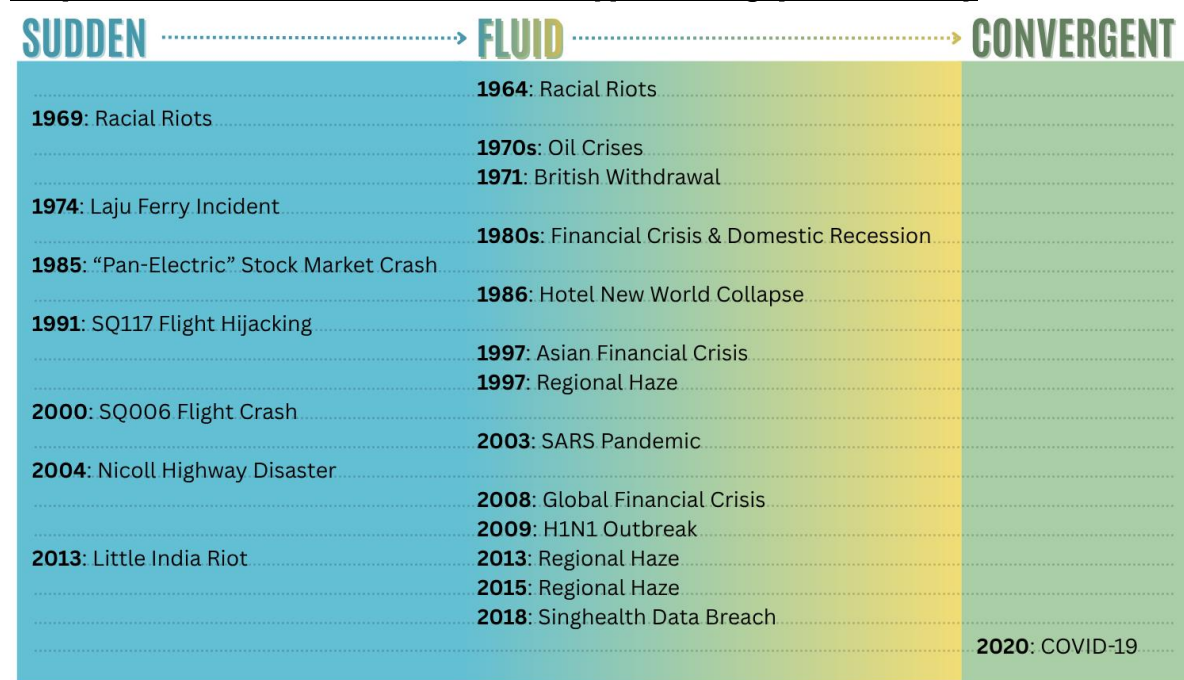
Beyond immediate and short-term crisis management, COVID-19 triggered deeper structural reforms. Dormitory standards were overhauled to address longstanding gaps in migrant worker housing. In 2021, the Urban Redevelopment Authority launched a year-long public engagement exercise as part of a Long-Term-Plan Review to future-proof Singapore's urban infrastructure. Planning priorities shifted toward mixed-use and flexible spaces to accommodate changing work patterns, alongside design features such as improved ventilation, contactless systems, and other adaptive layouts. Major infrastructure projects were similarly rethought, including the redesign of Changi Airport Terminal 5 to be pandemic-ready.

Institutional reforms followed. In November 2022, a national programme was launched to strengthen capabilities to detect and contain future outbreaks, including the Programme for Research in Epidemic Preparedness and Response (PREPARE), which draws on international expertise. The Ministry of Health established a permanent Crisis Strategy and Operations Group, and a new Communicable Diseases Agency was created. Preventive healthcare was elevated through initiatives such as

⁶ Chia, *Behind the Mask*, 35.

Healthier SG, signalling a longer-term shift toward population health and preventative care.⁷

Graph 2: Overview Continuum of Crisis Types in Singapore’s History



This continuum (see Graph 2) situates Singapore’s crisis episodes along a spectrum from sudden to convergent, offering a comparative view across time. Within this framework, COVID-19 emerges as the most comprehensive manifestation of convergence to date, characterised by its prolonged duration, the breadth of cross-domain strain, and the depth of policy and institutional change it necessitated. The depiction thus illustrates the degrees of convergence and charts how crisis forms intensify as background pressures accumulate and interact.

COVID-19 was not just a stress test but a prolonged crisis condition that exposed the limits of governing through isolated capabilities or sectoral expertise. It shows that when crises converge, the challenge is no longer speed alone, but balance: how analytical judgement, operational execution, and political legitimacy are sustained together over time. This provides the basis for examining how different crisis types place distinct demands on governance capacities – operational (includes fiscal and material), analytical, and political – and why each demands a different configuration of it.

⁷ Chia, *Behind the Mask*, 229.

Crisis Types: State Response and Policy Capacities

Given that real-world crises rarely transition as neatly as ideal types suggest, the crisis typology is best understood as a practical diagnostic tool to understand how the nature of a crisis evolves over time, and how governing responses must be recalibrated accordingly. It helps to explain why responses that succeed early on may face challenges as the crisis progresses and why escalation often reflects a change in crisis type rather than policy error. To move beyond intuitive distinctions, this section introduces a conceptual approach to understanding policy capacity, allowing crisis types – sudden, fluid, and convergent – to be analysed in terms of the specific demands they place on the state.

Understanding Policy Capacity

Policy capacity can be understood as a set of competencies and capabilities required to perform policy functions,⁸ organised along three interrelated dimensions: analytical, operational, and political.⁹ These capacities are not interchangeable. Each addresses a distinct governing challenge, and each becomes more or less salient depending on the crisis context. Crucially, Wu et al. emphasise that policy capacity does not exist in a vacuum nor reside solely within the state. It is shaped by interactions with non-state actors such as firms, civil society organisations, and international partners whom all are involved in policy processes. Capacity also operates at multiple levels¹⁰ – individual, organisational, and systemic – which means that strengths in one area cannot fully compensate for weaknesses in another.

While interconnected, these three capacities can be analytically distinguished:

- 1) **Operational capacity** concerns the ability to translate decisions into action. It encompasses inter-agency coordination, administrative competence, enforcement capability, and the resilience of delivery systems under stress. Closely tied to this is fiscal capacity, which underpins operational effectiveness through the allocation and deployment of budgets, reserves, and other financing mechanisms. Fiscal buffers provide the latitude to stabilise conditions and sustain response. Operational capacities thus allow the alignment of (material) resources¹¹ with policy actions so that they can be implemented in practice.¹²
- 2) **Analytical capacity** refers to the ability to diagnose problems, generate and interpret evidence, model scenarios, and design policy options. In crisis contexts, this includes risk assessment, forecasting, and the agility to revise assumptions

⁸ Which unfolds across agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.

⁹ Xun Wu, M. Ramesh, and Michael Howlett, "Policy Capacity: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Policy Competences and Capabilities," *Policy Sciences* 48, no. 2 (2015): 166-67.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹ An enabling dimension, material capacity refers to tangible resources such as fiscal reserves, manpower, infrastructure, stockpiles, and technological systems. While material capacity alone does not determine outcomes, its availability or absence conditions what is operationally possible.

¹² Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett, *Policy Capacity*, 168.

as conditions change. Analytical capacities help ensure policy actions are technically sound toward the attainment of policy goals.¹³

- 3) **Political capacity** captures the ability to secure legitimacy, consent, and compliance. It encompasses leadership credibility, communication, trust, and the ability to sustain support for policies that impose visible costs or prolonged disruption. Political capacities help to obtain and sustain political support for policy actions.¹⁴

Collectively, these capacities provide a broad way for understanding how varying crisis typologies stress the state's architecture differently, and why particular combinations of capacity may prove more effective in specific contexts (see Table 3). Rather than offering a single metric for success or failure, this approach highlights how misalignment between crisis type and capacity configuration can create governing risk.

Crisis Type and Capacity Alignment

Sudden crises privilege operational capacity. Speed, coordination, and oversight are decisive factors, with the crisis cycle typically concluding upon the restoration of systemic stability. Material and fiscal buffers concomitantly provide the latitude to stabilise conditions and sustain response.

Fluid crises complicate this picture. They may begin as contained shocks that evolve in ways that expose structural vulnerabilities, or as growing background pressures waiting for a trigger release. Effective management of such cases depends on the ability to transition: from operational (and material, fiscal) containment to analytical recalibration and political support for adjustment. Misalignment occurs when the governing logic – and policy capacity – remains static while the crisis itself shifts in form.

Convergent crises collapse these distinctions altogether, demanding sustained alignment across all dimensions of capacity. Operational systems must function continuously, analytical judgement must adapt to the evolving conditions, and political capacity becomes central over time in the maintenance of public trust and compliance over prolonged uncertainty. The risk lies not only in overload, but in capability desynchronisation when one capacity advances ahead of the others.

¹³ Ibid., 167-8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 168.

Table 3: Crisis Types and Capacity Prioritisation

CRISIS TYPE	Interaction with BACKGROUND PRESSURES	CAPACITY PRIORITISATION	MISALIGNMENT RISK
SUDDEN	Ad-hoc, immediate; largely insulated from background pressures	Operational (+ Material, Fiscal) front-loaded to restore stability quickly	Delay caused by over-analysis of time-critical response decision
FLUID	Sudden shock becomes entangled with or spills over into background pressures	Sequenced: Operational (+ Material, Fiscal) containment > Analytical reassessment > Political consolidation	Evolving crisis assumed to be contained, spillover escalates in reality
FULLY CONVERGENT	Prolonged, compounding interaction across multiple background pressures	Simultaneous and sustained use of all capacities	Capacity imbalance erodes policy coherence, legitimacy and endurance over time

The 1974 Laju Ferry incident exemplifies a largely contained sudden crisis. Resolution depended on rapid operational and material mobilisation: security deployment, command coordination, and enforcement. Once control was restored, the crisis effectively ended. Institutional learning followed, but political and analytical capacities were not decisive to immediate resolution.

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis illustrates a fluid crisis. Initial stabilisation relied on operational and material measures to restore confidence. As vulnerabilities surfaced, analytical capacity was required to recalibrate regulatory frameworks, while political capacity became necessary to sustain reform and public confidence. Governance hinged on transition rather than escalation.

COVID-19, by contrast, represents a convergent crisis. What began as operational containment quickly overwhelmed sectoral responses. Analytical capacity was continuously tested by evolving evidence; operational systems were stretched by sustained delivery demands; political capacity became central to maintaining trust and compliance; and material capacity underpinned fiscal and healthcare responses. No single dimension was sufficient on its own, and misalignment across capacities became a central governing risk.

Together, these cases show that the central challenge of crisis governance lies less in retrospective classification than in recognising when a crisis is changing form while it is unfolding. Paired with a capacity lens, the typology helps explain why governing logics must adapt over time: responses falter not because capacity is absent, but because the wrong capacities are prioritised as the crisis evolves.

Conclusion

This report began with COVID-19 as a generational jolt, not simply because of its scale, but because it unsettled familiar assumptions about how crises unfold and how states respond. Set against Singapore's longer crisis history, the pandemic appears less as an aberration than as a clarifying moment: crises do not arrive in a single form, nor do they test the state in uniform ways.

Across Singapore's post-independence experience, three broad crisis types recur. **Sudden crises** are discrete and time-bound, demanding swift address to restore order. **Fluid crises** emerge when shocks become entangled with background domestic pressures, requiring adaptation as disruptions spill across domains. **Convergent crises**, by contrast, overwhelm sectoral boundaries altogether, stretching institutions over time and forcing difficult trade-offs. COVID-19 was such a case, cutting across socio-economic sectors and social life in ways that no single sectoral playbook could contain.

The typology developed here is therefore diagnostic rather than predictive. It makes visible when a crisis is changing form as it unfolds, when a problem that initially calls for speed begins to demand coordination, judgement, and endurance. Read alongside a capacity lens, it helps explain why governance strains often reflect misalignment rather than an absence of capability, and why governing logics must be recalibrated as crises evolve.

Ultimately, resilience is not simply a matter of accumulating state capacity. It lies in aligning capacities to the needs of the moment, and being agile enough to adjust them as conditions change. In an era where shocks increasingly intersect with persistent background pressures, crisis governance may no longer be episodic. A crisis, in other words, is more than a passing moment, requiring sustained and adaptive responses. Success is often determined by the state's capacity for institutional learning and the strength of public trust – both before and during a crisis – with outcomes shaped by its ability to recalibrate policies before stresses overwhelm.

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