

Making a Rail Difference: Failure of the Singapore–Kuala Lumpur High-Speed Rail Project

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Introduction

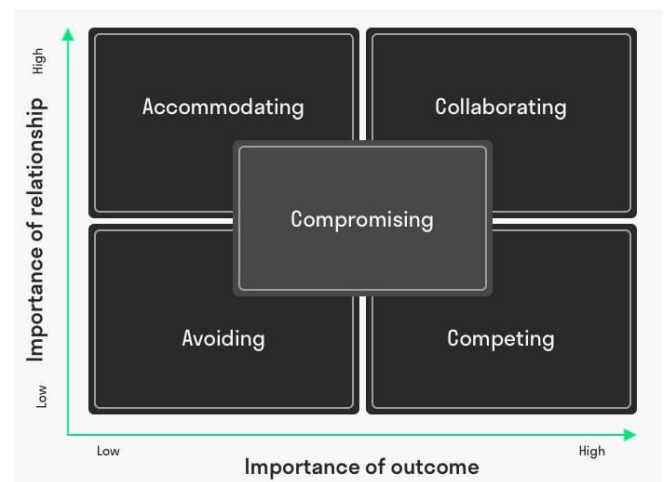
Once a year – my family, alongside countless ex-Malaysians living in Singapore, will travel by car or flight back to their hometowns on the most heavily congested day in the year. This annual pilgrimage is considered to be the most excruciating part of our Chinese New Year celebration, yet the unfortunate tradition is not likely to change any time soon.

In 2013, the high-speed rail (HSR) link between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur was publicly announced. The high-speed train promises breakneck speeds of more than 300kph and aimed to cut travel time across this route to a mere 90 minutes. This life-changing project had ever since been a key topic of discussion during our agonizing 15-hour annual car ride with my dad.

However, throughout the span of this long development, I have seen him gradually transition from being a huge optimist to a cynic. By the time Malaysia terminated the project in 2021, he had already made a conscious effort to refrain from discussing it.

The project had overwhelming benefits in economic outlook and strategic significance for both Singapore and Malaysia. So, how did a potential win-win situation eventually result in a lose-lose outcome? This is a story on power and politics in difficult bilateral development projects; one that involves Singapore's struggles with Malaysia which struggles with itself.

To understand this, we shall peek into Malaysia's circumstances in detail, because frankly, a small country like Singapore would not have the power to steer a project largely built on Malaysian soil.



Lewicki and Hiam's Negotiation Matrix to understand how negotiation stances change. Illustration by Toolshero.

So why is this important to investigate? An unexpectedly pragmatic answer would be to discuss Singapore's course of action – now that Malaysia has approached Singapore *again* last year about the possible resumption of the project. Will history repeat itself?

My commentary will bring you through the intricacies at each stage of the negotiation process: approval, suspension, and eventual termination. Beyond a synthesis of chronological events, I intend to expose the underlying conflict (back-facing) as well as the political framing (front-facing) that ultimately contributed to the changes in Malaysia's negotiation stances.

Drawing wisdom from the negotiation matrix developed by Lewicki and Hiam [1], I further rationalize how this transition in stances has eventually resulted in the unfortunate outcome. Finally, and most importantly, I reflect on Singapore's general responses and discuss how Singapore might pursue future development projects with Malaysia.

Approval of the HSR



The iconic selfie of Singaporean PM Lee with Malaysian PM Najib taken in 2013. Photo by PM Lee, Twitter.

“The project will change the way we do business, look at each other and interact” former Malaysian Prime Minister (PM) Najib Razak said in a joint press conference where the HSR Project was first announced publicly in February 2013.

Despite the light-hearted selfie, the boldness and certainty of these words accentuate that the project was not only a purely functional one but a symbolic milestone, one which shows both countries’ willingness to improve bilateral ties.

(Back-Facing)

Laying the foundation of the project

Slow and steady steps were taken: the approval process was lengthy but productive as many concerns towards economic feasibility, social impacts, and economic developments were brought to the table.

The project has an estimated cost of RM30 Billion (more than 6 Billion Euros). With such a huge price tag, the profitability of this project is to be discussed, especially the cost of construction and the price of tickets. However, both countries acknowledged the immense economic benefits of economic development, trade, and investments. Especially for Malaysia, which experiences higher levels of unemployment, this project could create jobs through construction, tourism and hospitality.

Of course, let us not forget the social benefit of sustainable urban growth in Malaysia. The HSR will alleviate vehicular congestion along the busiest cities, also allowing for a greater spread of the population and growth. With the rise of second and third-tier cities, income inequality could be controlled through more efficient allocation of business activities.

(Front-Facing)

Transparency in the announcements

With all smiles, the initial discussion concluded as a contractual agreement signed in December 2016. The agreement outlined the scope of the project inclusive of design, construction, and operations – where the routes and the location of stations were decided upon.

The finances of the HSR project will be through a jointly tendered asset company, AssetsCo, to manage all railway assets. Another joint company MyHSR was created to oversee the development of the project. And of course, the legally binding contract involved compensations as a testament to both countries’ commitments to the project.

To put the icing on the cake, Singapore and Malaysia had a signing ceremony for the Memorandum of Understanding in 2016 which was witnessed by both Prime Ministers.

A Collaborative style of negotiation

The project started on a high and optimistic note. The negotiations were productive because both countries were in close *collaboration* according to Lewicki and Hiam’s Negotiation Matrix.

The means to see eye to eye could only be achieved because the HSR was of the high value of *interest* for both parties as well as the great underlying importance of improving this bilateral *relationship*. The potential of this project is maximized through the consensus established by both countries, and it is expected to translate into a fruitful advancement in the project.

The HSR is the child of both Singapore and Malaysia – Singapore was only willing to cultivate it because they foresee a long trusting partnership. Especially because the project requires long-term undertaking, its success is very much dependent on trust through both countries’ mutual accountabilities and commitment.

Suspension of the HSR

“One of the most important priorities of course is the financial situation of the country... we need to do away with some of the unnecessary projects [that would] not earn us a single cent” Dr Mahathir Mohamad pledged as his first order of business after he was elected as the new Malaysian Prime Minister in May 2018.

The HSR project had a new stepfather. Progress was disrupted by the shift in power and the re-emergence of Malaysia’s oldest serving leader in politics. This finally led to a formal agreement in September on the same year to postpone the project as they sort out the new conditions.

(Back-Facing)

A jump in political ideologies

Mahathir had greatly differed in political ideologies and approaches to governance as compared to Najib; Mahathir is perceived as a nationalist and holds strong stances on economic development and national sovereignty while Najib was more of a consensus builder with more business-friendly focuses [2]. In fact, Mahathir was seen as the saviour of Malaysia from Najib whose reputation was destroyed by the 1MDB scandal where he embezzled a huge sum of money from the government fund he was overseeing.

This was also during a time when Malaysia was at crossroads: it was on the verge of declaring bankruptcy – and Mahathir was voted in to displace Najib and solve this financial mess.

With a greater focus on Malaysia's short-term finances, it is of Mahathir's core interest to either alter the terms and conditions of the agreement to favour Malaysia or reduce the cost of exiting from this deal. "We are going to find out how we can reduce the amount of money we have to pay for breaking the agreement...we are renegotiating the terms... the terms are very damaging to our economy," Mahathir told the Financial Times.



"Mahathir doing what he does best - Being vague" caption of a political meme. Illustration from DunTalkCockLah!

As he did not appreciate the HSR project contract agreed upon by Najib, Mahathir threatened to cancel or delay the project to call for a review of the agreements. This was an outright abuse of Singapore's amicability as they know Singapore would still be open to negotiation even if the rules are bent. Historically, this has happened multiple times, for instance, when Malaysia disputed the water agreement and Singapore accepted it.

(Front-Facing)

Reframing the HSR from a boon to a bane

"If Najib had continued to be the government, the country would certainly have gone bankrupt." Mahathir capitalized on this momentum to gain support for his authoritarian, hard-headed style of governance.

The HSR project could have very well been a scapegoat. Even if he was right, Mahathir could have exploited the worries surrounding the country's financial situation of the country to push for more political support. He pushed it to an extent that the CEO of MyHSR Corp urged him to refrain from politicising the project.

Framing can be used to understand the change in public sentiments for HSR; it was essentially the tactic used to influence opinions and political decisions [3]. Mahathir employs reframing to present the issue in an alternative way to compete against the initial perception of HSR's overwhelming potential. He does so in economic and political dimensions:

In the economic dimension, the HSR was seen generally by the public as a milestone for Malaysia's economic development. However, Mahathir challenged this normative perspective by pushing a pragmatic "reality" – where he claimed that with the existing national debts, there was a need to cut privileges such as this HSR project. By reframing the discussion, it guilt-tripped Malaysian citizens to believe their faith in the HSR was naïve and idealistic – thus, were swayed to enter Mahathir's frame.

In the political dimension, Mahathir often appeared to frame his interaction with competition through a hero-villain relationship. This "villain"-blaming can be seen in two ways - firstly, he portrayed the HSR project as a legacy project for the corrupted government led by Najib "to make the prime minister popular", and secondly, he asserted that the HSR "will not earn [Malaysia] a single cent", which also implied that Singapore would benefit most from this bilateral agreement. In all these frames, Mahathir was portrayed as the "hero" that would save the citizen "victims" by making assertive and strong decisions.

Should this really be the dominant frame? Often, a project as massive as this is expected to be extremely complex with long-term socio-economic impacts. Ideally, the decision as to how to proceed on infrastructure projects should involve holistic assessments of costs and benefits.

However, Mahathir's appeals to the public were through provoking nationalistic sentiments and moral outrage at the financial situation of the previous government. It is debated if there were indeed vested political motives [4] but, surely, he is guilty of oversimplifying the discussions through emotional triggers and suppressing alternative frames. Hence, he was seen to have much control and support over his decisions by overemphasizing the short-term economic narrative.

A shift to a *Competing* style of negotiation

What does this mean for the negotiation between Singapore and Malaysia? Malaysia's negotiation stance has dramatically changed from one of *collaboration* to *competition*. The new Malaysian government had a significant shift in values – their nationalistic and pragmatic beliefs influence how they saw the *outcome* and *relationship* of the HSR project.

One can even say that the *outcome* of the culling of the HSR project was of great priority for Mahathir and his party as it was his election promise to solve the present financial situation of Malaysia.

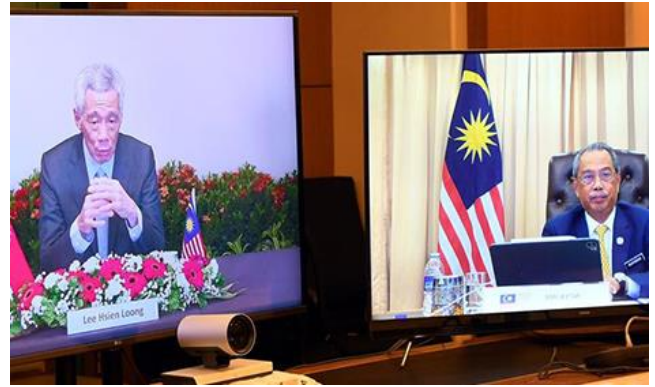
The importance of the Singapore-Malaysia *relationship* also took a backseat in this negotiation process. Mahathir was willing to threaten the agreement of the ongoing project; he was willing to compromise the bilateral trust to attain a more favourable outcome.

To step back into Singapore's shoes, this was 5 years of hard work potentially threatened because of Malaysia's financial circumstances – matters out of the Singaporean government's hands. At this point, the ball was in Malaysia's court and Singapore responded reactively.

Termination of the HSR.

Following the postponement, negotiations pursued for the next 3 years with increasingly unsuccessful results in each discussion. This was further exacerbated by another change in the Malaysian Prime Minister in 2020 due to internal conflicts in the political party and Mahathir was forced to step down. Muhyiddin, the deputy of the party, succeeded as the Prime Minister with much controversy around the legitimacy of the right to power.

This was likely the final nail in the coffin. The termination of the HSR was concluded in 2021 after both countries failed to reach a consensus despite multiple extensions.



Singaporean PM Lee visibly disappointed during a conference call with Malaysian PM Muhyiddin Yassin. Photo by MyHSR, Facebook

It was exactly as how my father described it – “this is hardly a surprise, but it is still extremely disappointing”.

(Back-Facing)

Several layers of indecisiveness

So, what were the two countries negotiating about that warranted a stalemate? One of which was to ditch the joint assets agreement, where instead of employing a “best-in-class industry player” through open tender, Malaysia wanted a local operator to secure jobs within the country. This was described as a “significant departure [from the agreement]” by Singapore's Transport Minister since neither country had experience in running a HSR. The lack of a joint tender could also harm the accountability and transparency of the project.

Another change was the realignment of the HSR different from initially agreed upon. This stimulates Malaysia's transit-oriented developments with the creation of more stations. However, Singapore was reluctant as it loses the original goal of a 90-minute travel time with this many new stops.

Also, Malaysia's was considering a proposed alternative which was just to upgrading the existing infrastructure – this plan will not be as fast, but it would be 70% cheaper and have control over the operations as desired. Critics [5] have warned about the economic unfeasibility of this alternative due to the inability to capitalize on economic agglomerations between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. However, this escape plan was likely to sway Muhyiddin's commitment to the HSR project.

Politics was also adding fuel to the fire. “Muhyiddin's government is an extremely weak one, susceptible to pressure from various angles and therefore unable to manoeuvre its way towards a continuation of the project,” said Dr Ooi, a Malaysian political historian commented.

There was scepticism if the HSR negotiations had been conceived with the economic interest of Malaysia in mind. Dr Ooi further opined that there was much lesser political will to manage the complexities surrounding the

HSR – “this project was too closely tied to the old government... this new government are probably looking for something else”.

(Front-Facing)

Displaying amicability to mask failure

This indecisiveness had to be shielded by a façade. To confirm the termination, Singapore and Malaysia released a joint ministerial statement. While the citizens of both countries would very much be interested in understanding the details that led up to this termination, the media portrayed it with much political correctness – highlighting statements to move but committing “to maintaining good bilateral relations and cooperate in various fields, including strengthening the connectivity between the two countries”.

Additionally, headlines in local newspapers were sure to mention Malaysia’s compensation. It might seem like overthinking, but the willingness to abide fully by the rules was uncommon and was strategically presented as a symbolic gesture.

This resulting amicability of this issue became the dominant frame. It paints the past 3 years of negotiations in an undeservingly positive light – which diverts attention away from the lack of certainty as well as the lack of interest the current Malaysian Government has for the original HSR agreement. This political correctness promotes a “victim mentality” and discourages taking responsibility for public actions.

A negotiation style of *Accommodation*

Alas, the negotiation stance has once again shifted – to one of *competition* to *accommodation*. From the *relationship* perspective, the desire for Malaysia to maintain close ties with Singapore was clear with the gesture of compensation. Despite such inconveniences they have caused, Malaysia has proven they can at least fulfil the contract. This accommodation style that Malaysia took could be an attempt to salvage the already embarrassing situation.

From an *outcome* perspective, the importance for Malaysia to preserve the HSR project was not one that the current government prioritizes. This was evident when the project’s termination was due to the lapse of the agreement deadline; Malaysia has left the ship (in this case, the train) to sink.

Once again, Singapore took the reactionary stance and doubled down its trust in Malaysia that the government would be able to come to a consensus. It did not pay off – Singapore played the game on Malaysia’s terms and lost.

Lesson to be learned; Rationalizing the lose-lose outcome

Malaysia lost an important opportunity for connectivity, economic development, and political trust; Singapore has not only lost much in the incurred cost but certainly its confidence in its neighbour. Both parties ended up in worse positions than they started with.

With Malaysia’s unpredictable stances from *cooperation* to *competition* and finally, to *accommodation*, the eventual lose-lose situation was because Malaysia could not converge on its interest – the very core of its participation in a joint development agreement.

“We should not have collaborated with Malaysia” was a common exclamation from my Singaporean friends and families. Such prescriptions made only in hindsight oversimplify the difficulties within this negotiation process and draw attention away from the real problem the Singapore Government needs to address. Knowing that Malaysia has such unpredictability in their stances, how should Singapore continue to approach negotiation if Singapore does intend to reap better successful results in long-term development projects?

Proactive as opposed to reactive

Throughout this process, Singapore took a reactionary position in the negotiation process; as Malaysia continuously changed its stance, Singapore’s response was “This does not align with the original agreement but let us compromise”. Singapore has remained firm and reliant on the contract. Although this would be the ideal means to safeguard Singapore’s interests, it is yet not extremely useful in dealing with a difficult party and improving the effective result.

When the HSR project was starting to go south, Singapore could have taken a more flexible strategy and reached out to Malaysia in goodwill to find ways to address their growing difficulties proactively. This could mean engaging in more direct communication and work-level collaborations as opposed to splitting development responsibilities.

Calls for robustness in future planning

Finances was a significant factor in Malaysia’s commitment to the project, especially with economic shocks like ballooning debts and the emergence of COVID-19. The facts surrounding the HSR project might have remained the same, but the internal circumstances have changed over time and Malaysia’s plans to build might overwhelm their existing state of affairs.

One could argue that Singapore would be overstepping its boundaries if it were to be involved in Malaysia's finances. Accepting Singapore's direct help will present a weak national image for Malaysia, a move that none of the previous Malaysian prime ministers would be comfortable or willing to make.

However, I argue that there are still means to sweeten the deal tacitly without stepping on any toes. Singapore could have broadened the agenda in reoccurring negotiations and would realise that this (finances as an *outcome*) could be a core problem for Malaysia. With this, the proposed HSR plans could be designed with greater financial sustainability in mind.

Singapore could have helped by exploring alternative funding sources or partnerships to finance the project, such as seeking investment from other countries or international organizations. Additionally, project controls can help with cost management through the long project life cycle. It takes corrective action in cases where costs overruns – and contingencies are carried out so that both parties can help in ensuring the project runs within their expectations.

Way forward, a second chance at redemption

The greatest irony is that after a roller coaster of a ride – spanning 8 long years of changing negotiations and inconsistencies – Malaysia has once again approached Singapore in 2022 about the possible resumption of the project. As the compensation was already paid, Singapore can redo the agreement once again.

My suggested approaches aim to broaden Singapore's mindset as opposed to offering strict guidelines to follow. The political climate of Malaysia is not expected to stabilize any time soon, and it would be up to Singapore to navigate reflexively through these uncertainties if they so wish to make this bilateral cooperation a success.

This lesson on development cooperation is translatable to other countries within the rest of South-East Asia where political instability is surely one of the crucial hindrances to investments and cooperation. The ability to manage this chaos would be essential in tapping into the region's potential.

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