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Second reading of the Cross-Border Railways (Border Control Co-location) Bill – Wrap-up Speech by...

Parliamentary Speeches

Second reading of the Cross-Border Railways (Border Control Co-location) Bill – Wrap-up Speech by Mr Edwin Tong, Minister for Law & Second Minister for Home Affairs

5 May 2026

Introduction

1. Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank the various Members for their speeches, their thoughtful comments and strong support of the Bill.
2. As some members have noted, I have already covered some of the points in my opening speech, so I don't propose to repeat them. But nonetheless, there are quite a number of process questions that I thought I would just take in turn.

Co-Location of CIQ Facilities

Malaysia's CIQ Operations in Singapore

3. Mr Vikram Nair, Ms Cassandra Lee and Mr Yip Hon Weng asked about the implications arising from the application of Malaysian law at Woodlands North Station. I think this is an important point so let me just take some time to clarify this.
4. First, the application of Malaysian border control laws is restricted to only the designated areas within Woodlands North Station.
 - (a) These designated areas will be clearly demarcated with signages, as required by Clause 7 of the Bill.
 - (b) LTA will work closely with its Malaysian counterparts to ensure that there is clarity and there are sufficient signages,
 - (c) and that they are also prominently displayed and presented in our official languages.
5. Second, I had mentioned that the application of Malaysia's border control laws in the designated areas in Woodlands North Station is for the sole purpose of empowering the Malaysian officers to conduct the necessary border clearances and security checks on travellers departing for Malaysia. Members might recall that it is because they have their border control located within Singapore, so we need to give them legal effect, for them to do the work that they do. We also have a corresponding arrangement on the Bukit Chagar side.

- (a) The effect of applying these laws in the designated areas would be similar to what travellers would encounter at the usual checkpoints in Malaysia when travelling to Malaysia. The experience is not altogether dissimilar, it is just that we put these powers



and the framework into the checkpoint at Woodlands North station, and correspondingly, on the other side at Bukit Chagar.

(b) As I mentioned earlier, the list of Malaysian laws which would apply in the designated areas is set out in Paragraph 16 of the Second Schedule.

(c) Without these laws in place, in the framework we have proposed in this Bill, in the designated areas in Woodlands North Station, Malaysian officers who operate here would have no legal backing to carry out their duties here,

(d) And in that respect, the co-located CIQ model would not work.

6. Third, there is no change to Singapore's territorial boundaries. Clause 8 of the Bill makes this point clear.

(a) Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to emphasise this point: Singapore law remains in effect over the entirety of Woodlands North Station, even within the designated areas.

(b) Singapore officers are available to assist travellers if needed.

(c) And if travellers encounter issues or need help in the designated areas, they should act similar to how they would anywhere else in Singapore –

(i) and where necessary, seek help from Singapore authorities.

7. Mr Vikram, Ms Lee and Mr Yip also asked about the recourse available if Malaysia's officers operating in Singapore exceed the scope of what they are allowed to do. Let me just reiterate a few points, some of which I've covered earlier.

8. The Bill sets clear limits to the powers that the Malaysian officers have when they exercise their duties in Singapore.

(a) For example, on the power to take possession of dangerous or controlled items uncovered during checks and detain individuals in connection with the above,

(i) Clause 15 provides that Malaysian preclearance officers transfer custody of these items or individuals to a Singapore officer as soon as is practicable. Don't forget, they are located in the same space, in the same checkpoint, in both Bukit Chagar, as well as in Woodlands North station.

(ii) This means that if a Malaysian officer detects such items, he is required to contact ICA officers without due delay,

- for ICA officers to then deal with in accordance with our own domestic standard operating procedures, and in accordance with Singapore law.

(iii) Additionally, Clause 18 makes clear that Malaysian officers are not allowed to make an arrest on Singapore's territory.

(b) Second, and this also speaks to some of the other questions that Mr Yip had raised,

(i) the immunities which the Bill confers on the actions of Malaysian officers are not unconditional.

(ii) They are contingent on those actions being undertaken as part of their official duties in the designated areas.

(iii) Actions taken outside of that, or which exceed the scope of these duties, would not be protected by the immunities.

9. Finally, the Singapore Minister for Home Affairs has the power to withdraw recognition for any Malaysian preclearance officer at any time without giving a reason.



(a) We do this for obvious reasons. We want to have the flexibility and ability to determine on a case-by-case basis, depending on what the facts might present at that occasion, and whether we need to exercise this power.

10. I should make clear that for completeness, that we should distinguish the powers set out under the main provisions of the Bill and those under the Second Schedule. I think there might have been some conflation and so I thought I would take some time to explain this.

11. The main body of the Bill is focused on what I called earlier the “ordinary” powers.

(a) These are baseline powers that are necessary for the day-to-day work of conducting border clearance and security checks, basically CIQ work.

(i) These include the powers to require travellers to present their passport, refuse entry of persons or goods,

(ii) and perform screening and other searches such as body searches.

(b) These are powers that are already provided to our own officers today for routine border clearance and security checks.

12. The Second Schedule, however, contains what I called “special” powers in my speech earlier.

(a) These are powers that equip officers with the legal basis to manage non-routine situations and ensure travellers’ safety and security.

(b) They are also no different from the powers ICA officers already have today, for managing incidents at the existing checkpoints.

(c) These powers have been codified in the bilateral RTS Link Supplementary Agreement entered into with Malaysia.

(d) The circumstances in which these powers will be used are limited.

(i) For example, officers are allowed to use reasonable force for purposes of detaining an individual who behaves in a disorderly or threatening manner.

(ii) And to Mr Yip’s point, conducting of strip or body searches without consent is strictly limited to individuals who present a danger to human life or safety.

Singapore’s CIQ Operations in Malaysia

13. Mr Yip asked whether Singapore officers deployed to Malaysia will be able to do their jobs effectively under adequate legal protection.

14. The Bill contains several provisions and safeguards to this effect. Let me just reiterate them.

(a) First, no Singapore officer will be deployed to Malaysia for cross-border railway duties

(i) unless the Minister is satisfied that Malaysian law allows the Singapore officer to do their official duties in Malaysia properly,

(ii) under the command of their own commanding officers,

(iii) and that they are conferred with the powers, duties and privileges equivalent to their counterparts in Malaysia.

(iv) That is made clear in Clause 22 of the Bill.



(b) As mentioned earlier, Malaysia's legislation, which is accessible online,

(i) accords protections and immunities to our officers based in Malaysia,

(ii) similar to what this Bill accords to Malaysian officers based in Singapore. To Mr Dennis Tan's point about there being substantive reciprocity in powers and immunities, I will confirm to him that the answer is yes.

(c) Second, Clause 24 makes clear that every Singapore officer deployed to Malaysia in relation to cross-border railways

(i) has the same rights, powers and immunities as they do when performing the same duties in Singapore.

(d) Third, the protections and immunities conferred on Malaysian officers in Singapore are conditional on our officers being accorded similar treatment when operating in Malaysia.

(i) Clause 44 of the Bill provides for the Minister to disapply any of these protections and immunities if there is a change in the level of protection and immunities afforded to our officers in Malaysia.

15. Mr Vikram asked about operational measures to prevent smuggling of prohibited or controlled items across the border.

16. The co-location of CIQ facilities provides convenience for travellers, as many of my colleagues in this House have articulated, but we have worked hard to ensure that this does not come at the expense of border security. Let me just reiterate these steps.

(a) First, there will be multiple layers of checks.

(i) Under the Bill, Singapore officers have the powers to conduct selective checks within the designated areas at Bukit Chagar Station. So, we can do so in Malaysia.

(ii) This is on top of the checks that Malaysia's officers would have done and conducted on all travellers before they are granted departure clearance at the Bukit Chagar Station.

(b) Second, when these same travellers arrive at Woodlands North Station, they may then also be subject to further selective security checks.

(c) Third, as I mentioned in my opening speech, Singapore and Malaysia have jointly developed a comprehensive set of SOPs for the purposes of conducting border clearance and security checks in a co-located CIQ arrangement.

(i) These SOPs will ensure smooth coordination between each layer of checks and mitigate the risk of threats slipping through.

(ii) I believe earlier a member asked whether we are in contact, whether there are joint exercises. The answer is yes, there are. They are planning exercises, as well as ground operational readiness exercises that we will conduct, not just before the start of the operationalisation of the RTS Link, but also subsequently, as we continue to run both CIQs and the [RTS] Link.

17. Ms Lee and Mr Yip asked how Singapore officers in Malaysia would handle individuals found to be carrying items controlled or prohibited under Singapore law, such as drugs or vapes.

18. If our officers at Bukit Chagar Station detect attempts to bring in vapes or drugs, Malaysian laws would apply.

(a) The traveller in question would be handed over to the Malaysian authorities,



(b) and the case would then be handled in accordance with Malaysian law and their position on offences on drugs and non-compliant vapes.

(c) But regardless of how Malaysian law deals with such attempts, our focus is to harden our borders against such items and prevent them from coming into Singapore.

(d) We will do so when we have the ability to do checks, both at Bukit Chagar, as well as at Woodlands North Station.

19. As Singapore officers are not granted powers of arrest when they are performing their duties in Malaysia,

(a) Ms Lee is correct to say that our officers would need to seek assistance by leveraging existing mechanisms and channels between both countries' law enforcement agencies. This is a reciprocal arrangement – we can't arrest in Malaysia, and Malaysian officers can't arrest in Singapore.

20. Should drugs or any other illicit items be found during our checks done in Singapore, Singapore law would then apply. Singapore's zero-tolerance approach to drug trafficking will not change.

21. Mr Yip asked about deployment of officers to the other country during what Paragraph 7 of the Second Schedule refers to as "serious unplanned incidents".

(a) As I mentioned earlier, this is a contingency, with the intention to provide for an expeditious but a controlled way of deploying additional manpower in appropriate cases. I understand the point that members have made about the urgency of the situation – Mr Tan mentioned fires, Mr Yip mentioned incidents and that every second counts. We agree with that. We endeavour to strike a balance between that urgency and the propriety of officers who respond to such incidents from both sides.

(i) For example, during a major outage, which might cause downtime on border clearance systems, for example,

(ii) it is in both countries' interests to ensure that there is additional manpower to maintain business continuity, to continue to flow, the clearance, security checks and so on, and also to minimise congestion.

(b) Such deployments should not exceed three days in the ordinary course, as provided for under Paragraph 8 of the Second Schedule,

(i) unless the Malaysian Government puts in a request for a longer duration and the Minister approves this request.

22. Ms Lee asked how the co-located CIQ of the RTS Link compares with co-located border control in other countries.

(a) One distinct feature of the RTS Link is where immigration clearance takes place.

(i) For the RTS Link, the traveller goes through departure and arrival clearances before embarkation.

(ii) This is similar to the experience at the Channel Tunnel which connects the UK and France, which Ms Lim also alluded to.

(b) A different approach is taken for the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link.

(i) In that case, a traveller departing Shenzhen goes through departure and arrival clearances only upon disembarkation in Hong Kong.

(ii) To return to Shenzhen, the reverse journey, he goes through departure and arrival clearances in Hong Kong before boarding the train.



(c) I wish to assure this House that the model adopted for our RTS Link is the subject of quite extensive deliberations. We looked at different models. We discussed internally and bilaterally with Malaysia. Obviously, the system has got to find consensus on both sides, to be able to be equally applicable on both sides for this to work.

(d) Ultimately, I want to assure the house that the aim is to provide a travel experience that is smooth and seamless as many have articulated. But at the same time, strictly without compromising on safety and security, especially of our border controls.

Cross-Border Incident Management

23. Mr Vikram and Dr Neo Kok Beng asked whether there will be security personnel onboard the RTS Link trains.

(a) There are no plans to deploy our enforcement officers onboard the trains, but there will be comprehensive CCTV coverage of the interior of the train cabins that will be monitored backend in real-time.

(b) The rail operator also has the option of deploying roving staff onboard trains, as and when they decide necessary, and they will be able to contact the operations control centre and provide any necessary assistance during the five-minute journey.

24. A few Members raised questions about concurrent criminal jurisdiction and cross-border incident management.

25. In particular, Ms Lee, Mr Yip and Ms Lim asked about the method by which Singapore and Malaysia would determine the country with primary right to exercise jurisdiction over criminal offences on board a train in transit.

(a) The country where the train completes its journey will be accorded the primary right to exercise jurisdiction. I mentioned this earlier in my opening speech, but I thought I'll just repeat some of these points.

(i) So therefore, if an offence was committed on a train that is journeying from Bukit Chagar Station to Woodlands North Station, then Singapore would have primary right. And the converse is true. Earlier, I think a member said what happens if you break down halfway and you are towed back to your original station? Then I suppose the destination will be where you are towed back to, and in that scenario, that will be the country that has the primary jurisdiction.

(b) Should the offence be committed on the reverse journey, it will be the converse of that I have just said earlier, and Malaysia would have primary right.

(i) However, where there is public interest for us to conduct investigations into the matter, Singapore may request for Malaysia to waive its right.

(ii) We have not hardcoded what public interest might look like, because each scenario could well be different, and it depends on the context, the different circumstances on which the case arises, and the way in which we might view our interest in a particular offence or the individual concern. So we have not hardcoded that into the framework here, but there is an arrangement within the bilateral agreements. And I would say also that it is not only in the context of such an arrangement, where we have co-located the CIQs, that issues of public interest might arise. In fact, it arises all the time when there are cross-border incidents. And you know that we have one of the busiest cross-border land checkpoints at the causeway, and we have been managing this with the Malaysians consistently. So, there will be no change to that.

(c) The law enforcement agencies of the country with primary right to exercise jurisdiction will work closely with the rail operator to gather and preserve any available evidence.

(d) For what we term as 'live' cross-border incidents such as a train stalling on the tracks,



(i) both countries have agreed that the country assigned as Incident Manager would also have primary right to exercise jurisdiction and carry out investigations.

26. That is the method, I want to emphasise that both countries have discussed and agreed on in the RTS Link Supplementary Agreement, and both sides have the obligation under those agreements to abide by it. There are situations where one country may well want to assert jurisdiction, but there's also a process for countries to discuss if both assess that there's public interest in prosecuting the case. As I mentioned earlier, we come across these occasions, not infrequently.

(a) So long as both sides adhere to this agreement, it is unlikely that anyone would be exposed to double prosecution for the same conduct.

(b) Ms Lim had asked in particular, why the detail of these arrangements as to jurisdiction have not been spelt out in this Bill. I would just like to remind this House that our Bill applies to cross-border railways generally. It is not just limited to giving effect to the bilateral arrangements for this particular RTS link with Johor Bukit Chagar, and it is purpose-built to accommodate similar treaties for other cross-border railways, if and when they arise. We can't foresee the precise details of those cross-border railways, whether they might be a co-location of CIQ, or how the parties might take jurisdiction of the trains in a manner in which I have articulated earlier. And therefore, our approach has been to espouse the broad principles on criminal jurisdiction in the Bill itself. And as I mentioned earlier, some of the specifics that relate to the RTS link, in this case, appear in the two Schedules that I have taken members through earlier. Malaysia, which I think Ms Lim had taken the trouble of looking up the legislation, has taken a different approach. You will see that, in fact, the Malaysian Bill specifically mentions Singapore-Johor Link, and it is designed specifically for this Link only, and that's why they have enacted an RTS-specific legislation which codifies the specific arrangements that we have agreed to bilaterally in our agreements in their Bill. So, they have taken a different approach from us.

27. Mr Vikram, Ms Lee and Mr Yip also asked how both sides would coordinate responses to major cross-border incidents, and whether certain operational aspects would be addressed separately under other arrangements.

(a) Sir, I had spoken earlier on the principles of cross-border incident management that both sides have agreed to abide by.

(b) These are important principles that would help determine the country that would have overall command and control of the management of a cross-border incident, and ensure that both countries' responses are coordinated and do not pose unnecessary risk to friendly forces.

(c) Both sides have also addressed other operational aspects of cross-border incident management via a comprehensive set of joint SOPs.

(d) These were developed with the rail operator's involvement, so that all relevant stakeholders, around such an incident which might occur, can work in tandem to respond effectively to such incidents.

(e) Operational agencies from both countries, along with the rail operator, will conduct joint exercises later this year, ahead of the RTS Link service commencement, both to test as well as to validate the application of these SOPs.

28. Mr Yip had an additional question on ensuring officers' accountability during cross-border incident management.

29. Sir, every officer has to adhere to the established procedures and limits in the exercise of the powers conferred upon them. I had taken members through earlier what these limits would look like in my opening speech, as well as earlier in my reply speech.

30. When discharging their duties, be it managing cross-border incidents or even carrying out routine duties at the CIQ zone, all officers remain under the order of their own



commanding officers.

31. This is provided for under Clauses 13, 22, 30 and 34 of the Bill.

Data Protection

32. Turning now to data protection, Ms Lee asked how the provisions regarding data protection would be operationalised.

33. As I mentioned, the Bill will keep the data collected or generated by Singapore officers in Malaysia under the governance of Singapore law, and provide for the immunity of our equipment and our devices in Malaysia from seizure or other forms of interference.

34. Let me assure this House and all Members that the stringent requirements imposed on the handling, processing and storing of data in Singapore

(a) are similarly applicable to any data or information Singapore officers in Malaysia collect or generate in the course of their work.

35. Mr Dennis Tan had asked whether the data that we collect, when transmitted back to Singapore, would be protected or secured, and he asked whether it will be air-gapped. The answer is yes, it would be, so we have a secure line that transmits that data.

36. Ms Lee also asked how the Government would hold relevant parties accountable in the event of a data breach.

(a) Since the data is collected, transmitted, kept and governed under Singapore law, any data breach would therefore be dealt with in accordance with Singapore law. Something that we are familiar with.

37. If the incident is a result of bilateral obligations relating to data protection and inviolability of equipment not being complied with,

(a) then the Government will consider all available legal and diplomatic options,

(b) in accordance with the bilateral RTS Link treaties as well as the relevant international law.

Conclusion

38. Sir, I believe I have covered members' queries and questions, so let me conclude. I thank the members for underscoring the point that this Bill is a key supporting pillar of the RTS Link, and will bring convenience of travel to several segments of society.

39. This Bill gives effect to a very comprehensive set of arrangements that facilitate co-located CIQ clearance,

(a) and undergirds jointly developed protocols for coordinated management of cross-border incidents.

40. This will in turn help to ensure that the RTS Link experience for travellers is not only convenient and seamless, but also safe and secure.

41. On that note, I thank Members for their support of the Bill.

42. Mr Deputy Speaker, I beg to move.



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