The Economist ran an article entitled Let’s All Bash Singapore last month. It concluded that Singapore is the rich little place in South-east Asia that others love to hate.

Indeed, if you look at the attitudes of our neighbours over the recent past, that is what it seems. From comments about Singapore being a “little red dot” to banning of sand exports by Indonesia, to the constant niggles with Malaysian politicians, and, of course, the latest row with the Thai government when top-level meetings with Singaporean officials were cancelled after the visit of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

I’ve thought of a unique concept – National Social Responsibility (NSR) – which might go a long way in soothing nerves in the neighbourhood.

NSR is a concept that is derived from another concept – Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

The latter is nothing new to the business world. Mahatma Gandhi believed that a businessman’s wealth is not his own but held in trust for society.

Companies across the globe have CSR initiatives that serve society. Similarly, NSR is the responsibility of a nation to care not only about its own citizens, but also those of its neighbours.

I’m not saying each nation has a responsibility to ensure its neighbours’ well-being, but it should have compassion for the region’s people as well.

Isn’t that among the reasons for the formation of organisations such as Asean and the European Union?

Just like CSR, when a nation initiates NSR towards its neighbours, there is ample goodwill generated to iron out minor political differences.

Let me suggest a few ways in which a country like Singapore can actually put it into practice. Singapore can openly share its economic prowess and strong governance abilities with its neighbours.

The Government is already helping to design a teachers’ training institute in Abu Dhabi along the lines of the National Institute of Education. How about offering this service for countries in the region too, and at a discount?

Another innovative way to increase goodwill from the region is to institute a series of regional talent awards based on the Nobel Prizes.

Such awards, let’s call them The Singapore Award, would be given to individuals who have made a tremendous contribution in uplifting the region in a particular field – be it peace, physics or poverty.

This can be sponsored mainly by the Government, and a fund can be created by some other countries as well. Such a measure would certainly be a great way of contributing to the region.

One effective way to launch NSR is to link it to CSR.

Singapore-based companies that carry out a minimum percentage of its CSR in the region can be given incentives such as tax relief.

For example, if PSA helps develop a deep-sea port in East Timor, it can be given more grants for future projects. This would encourage the private sector to participate in NSR activities, fulfilling their own CSR needs at the same time.

At the inaugural Distinguished Speakers Lecture Series held last Wednesday, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Kishore Mahbubani said: “One of Singapore’s biggest challenges is to demonstrate to our neighbours that the old image of Singapore as a parasite on the region is wrong. It is very difficult to explain the point that Singapore adds value to the region, and does not subtract value.”

NSR can allow Singapore to not only add real visible value to the region, but also make our neighbours feel good about us being there for them. NSR has the potential to give a whole new meaning to the commandment, “Love your neighbour.”

The writer is a final-year student at the School of Information Systems at SMU.