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MULTILATERALISM AT A CROSSROADS

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
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Madam President
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

1 It is a bright and sunny Saturday morning outside. I thank you for your sacrifice of time to participate in this debate. I add my voice to congratulate Her Excellency Maria Fernanda Espinosa of Ecuador on her election as President of the 73rd session of the General Assembly. I also thank my good friend Miroslav Lajčák, the Foreign Minister of Slovakia, for his sterling leadership of the 72nd session.

2 The single word we have probably heard the most over the last week is “multilateralism”. Multilateralism is at a crossroads and in fact is facing a significant threat. In recent years, we have witnessed a crisis of confidence in the concept of multilateralism and its institutions. Whether in trade, security or dispute resolution, questions have arisen about whether the multilateral system can continue to deliver effective solutions to all the multitude of problems that we face in the world. I stand here as the representative of a tiny, open, trade-dependent city-state; Singapore has witnessed this recent retreat from multilateralism with grave concern. And that is why today, I want to raise my voice in defence of multilateralism. There is perhaps no better forum for me to do so than at the UN, the ultimate bastion of multilateralism.

3 It is actually easy to understand why there is a resurgence of isolationist, protectionist and even xenophobic sentiments in the political arena all over the world. We are live in uncertain, volatile and disruptive times. The digital revolution is

increasingly disrupting the way we live, work, play, communicate, organise and mobilise our societies. Non-state actors and transboundary threats - terrorism, pandemics and climate change remain a clear and present danger. Frontier issues like artificial intelligence and cybercrime have leapt from the pages of science fiction into our daily lives. Our social cohesion is breaking down and all too often, we operate in isolated, social and political bubbles

4 At the same time, the international order as we know it is being disrupted. Since 1945, many countries and regions have benefitted from the open and global system; a system, a world order, that was substantially underwritten by a single power - the United States of America. But today, we are transitioning into a multipolar world, where other powers are quite rightly beginning to assume a greater role in multiple spheres. This is a transition that needs to be managed carefully, delicately.

Importance of Rules-Based Multilateral System

5 I am not saying that multilateralism is perfect. In fact, we recognise that it hasn't always fulfilled all its promises. And quite frankly, sometimes, it has been over-sold as a panacea. The question then is how do we make multilateralism work in this rapidly shifting geo-strategic context?

6 My take is that every state has to make room to accommodate these new realities and find a new *modus vivendi*. Foreign policy and trade policy actually always begin at home. Politics is always local. We need to achieve this rebalancing in our domestic societies and political sphere, as well as a rebalancing in the global and international sphere. The global order will evolve; our responsibilities will need to be rebalanced. In this perilous period of transition, we cannot and should not abandon the rules-based world order that has brought unprecedented peace and prosperity for 70 years.

7 In fact, the scale and transboundary nature of the challenges we face today demand more cohesion and more cooperation, not less. There is a strong case to be made for doubling down on multilateralism, rather than retreating from it. We need a clear framework of rules and norms to ensure predictability and stability in inter-state relations and commerce. Defining these rules through a multilateral process in which all States engage one another as equals, is essential to build consensus and to strengthen respect for the rule of law.

8 Compliance with agreed rules by all states is not only essential for global stability and for governing of the global commons, but is especially crucial to a small city-state like Singapore. The principle that agreements will be respected and will be implemented is fundamental for our survival. Without the rule of international law, “the strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must”. For small states like Singapore, we cannot survive in such a world. That is why Singapore has always been a staunch defender of the UN, international law and the multilateral system.

9 Take trade for example. Globalisation actually has not benefitted everyone equally. There remain pockets of poverty and hunger in our world. Our people are worried about jobs. Unfortunately, the conventional arguments in favour of free trade, economic integration, and cooperation between countries – these arguments have gone out of fashion. Today, trade frictions between the US and China have raised the spectre of a trade war.

10 We cannot simply blame globalisation. All governments of the day have an obligation to consider long-term and sustainable solutions, instead of reflexively raising trade barriers. For example, to truly address the anxieties, widening inequality and wage stagnation, we must address the root causes. In the midst of the digital revolution, we must ensure that our people have the right skills for new emerging jobs. It is futile to fight to protect obsolete technologies and to squabble over yesterday’s jobs. On the contrary, we need to try to take advantage of the new opportunities of the global market and the jobs of the future. It is thus our responsibility, as governments, to actively put in place policies to train, retrain, retool and reskill our citizens. We need to invest and reinvest in infrastructure, training and education. That is why Singapore is working so hard to restructure our education system. We are putting in serious money to enable our people to continuously upgrade and learn new skills through a programme which we call SkillsFuture. The emphasis is on the word “future”. Our focus is to restructure our economy – to identify and work with the private sector to transform jobs, to enhance our competitiveness and to elevate productivity across the board. This is fundamentally an investment in our people to make sure that all of us are ready for the future.

11 Ultimately, no country benefits from trade conflicts and protectionism. The negative impacts will ripple through the global supply chain and will undermine growth and prosperity in all countries. We will all be worse off. At a time of increasing inter-connectedness and inter-dependence, now more than ever before, we need a multilateral approach and we need strong rules. Singapore will continue to be a strong and staunch supporter of the rules-based multilateral trading system. The critical importance of the World Trade Organisation cannot be over-emphasised. It is the ultimate neutral arbiter of international trade disputes.

Developing Rules and Norms to Govern Cyberspace

12 Another area where we need to urgently promote the adoption and implementation of rules and norms is in cyberspace. To reap the full benefits of digital technologies, we must develop a trusted, open and inclusive cyberspace underpinned by international law and well-defined norms of responsible State behaviour.

13 The International Telecommunications Union ranked Singapore as the country most committed to cybersecurity in 2017. Yet, in July this year, we discovered that one of Singapore's major health databases was subject to an advanced persistent threat. This was a deliberate, targeted and sophisticated cyber-attack. No country is immune from these attacks.

14 All of us need to work together. We need to implement the norms and rules that will prohibit such attacks on critical infrastructure, particularly where lives are at stake. As the only universal, inclusive, multilateral forum, states have always turned to the UN to develop the rules that govern the global commons. To take the example of the global commons, consider the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It provides a global legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas, which we depend on for trade, food and resources.

15 Just as Singapore strongly supported the process behind UNCLOS, Singapore stands ready to contribute to the UN's work to develop and adopt norms and rules on cybersecurity. This is simply another example of the global commons. And we cannot allow the tragedy of the commons to occur in cyberspace, in the sea, and the area of climate change. To this end, we support the reconvening of the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) and the continuation of its work in developing the norms of state behaviour in cyberspace.

16 Cybersecurity has been a priority for Singapore's Chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). At the 3rd ASEAN Ministerial Conference on Cybersecurity, which was just held in Singapore last week, all 10 ASEAN Member States agreed to subscribe in-principle to the 11 norms contained in the UN GGE's 2015 Report.

17 Singapore is also committed to capacity building which is essential for States to effectively implement the rules and norms of state behaviour. Singapore will launch an ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence in 2019. We have also partnered with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) on a UN-Singapore Cyber Programme that will raise awareness and build capacity in our region.

Regional Cooperation in support of multilateralism: ASEAN

18 Our work in ASEAN is rooted in our belief that regional organisations can demonstrate how multilateralism continues to be relevant and beneficial for people all over the world.

19 As the ASEAN Chair this year, Singapore will continue to work with all ASEAN Member States and external partners to ensure that the regional architecture remains open, inclusive and rules-based.

20 We are working with our partners to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). When this is concluded, the RCEP will be the world's largest trading bloc, accounting for up to a third of global GDP. But this is not just about citing big trade figures. This is also an effort to send a powerful message where ASEAN Member States and our six partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and the ROK) stand. We are committed to free trade, regional integration and international cooperation.

21 ASEAN Member States are also working together to leverage the digital revolution for our peoples' benefit. We established the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) at the 32nd ASEAN Summit in April this year. The ASCN focuses on ensuring interoperability and integration of services, and allows cities in our region to share experiences, exchange solutions and the lessons learnt. We have just concluded an ASEAN Agreement on streamlining e-commerce within Southeast Asia so that our businesses can market and sell their products easily, conveniently and seamlessly across Southeast Asia.

22 ASEAN Member States are also committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes, and to do so through a multilateral process. Let me now address my friends in Myanmar, and particularly the situation in the Rakhine State. This is a matter of grave concern. The crisis is a complex, deep-rooted, inter-communal conflict which has its roots over centuries. More recently, we have read harrowing accounts of brutal and shocking atrocities. We have to condemn all human rights violations – the threats, loss of life and the violence inflicted on defenceless people. We expect the Independent Commission of Enquiry established by the Government of Myanmar to carry out impartial investigations and to hold those responsible fully accountable. We also hope that the voluntary return of refugees back to Myanmar in a safe, secure and dignified way will commence without undue delay. Ultimately, a political solution needs to be found. A solution and a process that will involve reconciliation, fairness, justice, and better prospects for all communities. Only then can we achieve a durable solution to this complex, longstanding problem. And all ASEAN Member States stand ready to support and assist Myanmar in this very challenging, difficult situation.

Singapore's contributions to support the UN and multilateralism

23 We have also been watching, not far from our region, the developments on the Korean Peninsula. This year, Singapore was able to make a small contribution towards easing tensions by hosting the Summit between the US and the DPRK leaders in June. This Summit, as well as the three inter-Korean dialogues which have been held this year, are important steps towards lasting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Singapore hopes that the dialogue and efforts, as well as the reservoir of trust that is being built up will ultimately bring peace to this troubled part of Asia.

24 Let me conclude, Excellencies, by saying that there is no doubt that multilateralism needs to be defended and the UN itself needs to be strengthened. That is the only way to deal with complex global challenges of the future. As Member States of the UN, each of us have a responsibility to work together, to improve and adapt the multilateral systems that we have built painstakingly over seven decades. We need to find solutions and build consensus so that our people can lead better, more secure and more peaceful lives. Ultimately, a rules-based multilateral system is absolutely indispensable to secure peace and prosperity for our people at home and on this one planet that we call Earth.

Source:

https://www1.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2018/09/30092018_Min-at-UNGA