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Speech by Mr David T E Lim, Minister of State for Defence and Information and the Arts, at the 2nd Malaysia-Singapore Business Forum on 5 September 2000, 12:30pm, at the Four Seasons Hotel

Your excellency, Minister Hishammuddin,
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

1. The lead article in a recent issue of the Economist began with this quote: “It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for the exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth”.
2. That’s quite a dramatic statement. But it wasn’t about the Internet. In fact, the article was entitled: “What the Internet Cannot Do”. That quote was made 142 years ago, when the first trans-Atlantic telegraphic cable was inaugurated. And the thrust of the Economist article was that technology, while bringing great promise to improve communications between people, cannot do the job that human beings have been tasked to do. Relationships are built between people - built step by step, or should I say, word by word, through personal contacts, dialogues, and exchanges. They develop out of mutual interests, and mutual respect.

3. I am therefore glad that you are having this forum today. It provides yet another occasion for business leaders from both Singapore and Malaysia to interact.
4. The need for closer interaction is even more pressing today. The Internet has opened up a whole new way of doing business. It has caused global markets to emerge more quickly, and changed the basis on which business is conducted. Business models that work well today are those built on high-connectivity, quick start-up, and a fast roll out to multiple markets. Being connected is the name of the game.
5. This is just as true between countries as it is for the businessman. Regional economic co-operation is increasingly an essential strategy for success. Before the Asian Economic Crisis struck, all of Asia was in an up-beat mood. South East Asia, although smaller in economic weight than North East Asia, was nonetheless racing along with high growth rates.
6. But the Economic Crisis dampened the growth and the mood. Today, growth is back, but not evenly. North East Asia, with its large size, and helped along by the large and increasingly affluent market in China, is positioned to grow and do well. But South East Asia's outlook is less certain, as economic recovery is still tentative and nascent in several ASEAN countries.
7. Malaysia and Singapore have been the quickest to pull out of the economic nosedive. This makes co-operation between our two countries all the more essential, not just for our own prosperity, but the prosperity of the region. Our continued growth can help to firm up the nascent recovery elsewhere in ASEAN. Our businessmen should therefore seek new ways to co-operate to tap the growing opportunities not only in our two countries, but also in ASEAN and beyond.
8. The ties between Singaporean and Malaysian businessmen have always been close. These ties have held-up through good times and bad. At the country level, we have also managed to maintain our working relationships despite periods of unhappiness.
9. For our businessmen, more can be done when the political relationship between our countries is good. It is therefore in our mutual interest to keep bilateral ties on an even keel. We can go further, and move more quickly,

when in calm waters rather than in stormy seas.

10. As two separate countries, we have our differences, both over goals and means. This is a natural outcome of our different structures, systems and beliefs. But at the same time, we share many similar goals and interests. That is why we have co-operated and benefited from such co-operation, in areas ranging from security arrangements to tourism promotion. Our interactions span the whole spectrum of economic, social and political affairs.
11. I therefore welcome the calls by my cabinet colleagues and our Malaysian counterparts for increased interaction between the leaders and people of our two countries. Our relationships are multi-faceted. They should also be multi-layered and multi-threaded, so that even if things get sticky in one layer or a thread should break, there will be other ways and means for us to continue co-operation.
12. What helped us smoothen the bumps in our relationships in the past were the personal relationships between the older generation of leaders of our countries. Likewise, each successive generation of leaders must form their own ties. Through frequent interactions, our leaders become more aware of each other's aspirations, how we think about the future, and how our systems and institutions operate. Such understanding and rapport will help to ensure that neither side would be quick to take umbrage or reach the wrong conclusions when unexpected developments take place or issues crop up suddenly. Friendship and trust, built up through regular and informal contact, will help to hold our relationships steady, and allow us to have calm and direct discussions should problems arise.
13. I also welcome the suggestion for our youth to play a major part in achieving this. Our youth have grown up in a global culture that emphasizes the importance of relationships. We should encourage them to form close neighbourly ties. I would like to urge the educational institutions and youth organisations of both our countries to organise more academic and social exchanges. We can interact and collaborate over a wide array of activities, in sports, arts, cultural events, community services and so on. As Chairman of the National Youth Council, I will certainly encourage our youth to look for more opportunities to jointly conduct projects with their Malaysian friends.

14. Ladies and gentlemen: the new millennium coincides with a period of human development that has made human interaction and co-operation all the more essential for progress. Malaysia and Singapore are close neighbours that share many common interests. The more we are able to work closely together on the areas that we agree on, the less difficult it would be to manage our differences. Let us seek to build ties that will help us meet the challenges of the future, both as partners and as friends, and in doing so, add to the stability and attractiveness of our region.

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