



SPEECH

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Speech by Senior Minister of State for Defence, Mr Ong Ye Kung, at the first plenary session of the seventh Xiangshan Forum: "Responding to new security challenges in the Asia-Pacific through cooperation" on 11 October 2016

11 Oct 2016

Ladies and gentlemen

I am very happy to be here to attend the Xiangshan Forum for the first time. I would like to thank Admiral Sun Jianguo, General (GEN) Cai Yingting and the organisers for their warm welcome and hospitality extended to me and my delegation.

The Globalized World and Modern Life

There is a commonality amongst all of us in this room. And that is we are all dedicated to defend our countries, our sovereignties, and the right for our people to lead our way of life. That means freedom to determine our future, and from oppression and tyranny.

What is the way of life of our people today? It has evolved dramatically over the past decades. In this globalised world, it includes being connected to the vast amount of information and knowledge on the world wide web; it means having choices and options of goods and services from many countries by many companies throughout the world. It means being able to experience walking the Great Wall of China, shopping at the New York Times Square, enjoying hawker food in Malaysia and Singapore; the list goes on.

These are the needs and expectations of our younger generation. Many of them do not know of any other way of living apart from the current one in the globalised world. If that is gone, we are all poorer. When we defend our way of life, we are defending that too.

China is an excellent example of how a country and its people have benefitted from globalisation. I was in Doha, Qatar in 2001 when China formally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). There was an atmosphere of jubilation amongst delegates from around the world, as we welcomed the world's most populous nation into the rules-based global trading community.

The world witnessed with admiration as over the decades, China's economic reforms and progress brought hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, transformed cityscapes throughout the country, and enabled China to move from value-added manufacturing to creating innovative and game-changing companies like Alibaba, Tencent and Didi. Today, China is the second largest economy in the world; the Renmimbi has been officially added to the International Monetary Fund's Special Drawing Rights currency basket; and China plays host to almost all major companies of the world and plays an active role in the United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.

Instincts of a Southeast Asian City State

On the other end of the spectrum, a small country like Singapore has also managed to embrace and adapt to globalisation, and benefit from it. This is the only viable policy option for Singapore, and it is also instinctive to us, because we are a small city state situated in Southeast Asia, and that makes us hold dear to two principles, as follows:

First, to be open and inclusive. Geographically, the Southeast Asian archipelago straddled the key trade route over the centuries. In the 19th century, the British set up a trading post in Singapore to serve the India-China trade. So being open and inclusive has over time entered the DNA of Southeast Asians. All major religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity – have shaped who we are and yet the region lives in peace and harmony. And because of who we are, ASEAN plays host to various forums where major powers have neutral and open platforms to engage each other in an open and candid manner.

Singapore, in particular, has been a strong advocate of an open and inclusive regional architecture, and has supported various regional forums. At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, we were a founding member of P4, a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between four small countries [Singapore, Brunei, New Zealand and Chile], which formed the building block for the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement today. In year 2000, former Chinese premier Zhu Rongji proposed an ASEAN-China FTA at the ASEAN Plus Three meeting in Singapore. Today, that has further developed into the RCEP, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which also includes India. All these are significant steps towards a more open, inclusive and peaceful regional architecture.

The second principle is a rules-based world order. As a small city state, Singapore cannot survive in a "might is right" world. That is why when Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965 and became an independent nation, our Separation Agreement guaranteed our Water Agreements with Malaysia. A small country needs a world order that respects and abides by international law and the sanctity of contracts and agreements. We cannot over rely on history, because it was not too long ago in history that Singapore did not exist.

That is also why Singapore diplomats played active roles in the establishment of international conventions like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and in holding the multilateral trading regime of the WTO, and more recently, during the climate change negotiations.

A New Era of Inclusivity and Rule Based Order

These two principles do not just work for small city states, but are the underlying bases for which all countries, big and small, can co-exist and prosper in the era of globalisation.

An open and inclusive attitude in the era of globalisation changes the rules of engagement for new and emerging powers. We no longer have to subscribe to the belief that relations between a rising and an incumbent power are a zero-sum game and conflict is unavoidable. Global conditions today are fundamentally different, because with interconnected global markets and production systems, countries are interdependent. The present world order is big enough to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of all nations, big and small, provided we stay open and inclusive.

At the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in January 2015, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said that countries should adopt an attitude akin to the sea accepting all streams – "海纳百川" – and work together to expand common ground while accepting differences, and seeking win-win progress through inclusive cooperation.

In such a system, there will need to be clear and established norms and rules of behaviour on how countries engage one another to ensure an atmosphere of certainty and predictability. Even when issues are complex and differences are significant, we can start by respecting and setting aside differences, while codifying rules and commonalities that we can all agree to. In Chinese, this is called "求同存异".

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For example, ASEAN and China have agreed to complete the framework for the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea by mid-2017. Singapore has also proposed to expand the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea to all ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus countries, establish a code of conduct for submariners to enhance underwater and submarine operational safety, as well as a protocol to regulate air encounters between military aircraft. All these cooperative mechanisms will enhance mutual confidence and reduce the risk of miscalculations during tensions and uncertainty. Our militaries can also do their part to promote regional stability, through holding joint exercises, sharing views at forums such as this, and keeping communication lines open.

The ADMM-Plus Maritime Security and Counter-Terrorism Exercise co-organised by Australia, Brunei, Singapore, and New Zealand in May this year is one such example. GEN Chang Wanquan proposed an ASEAN-China Maritime Exercise earlier this year. As the current ASEAN-China Country Coordinator, Singapore will support and facilitate this important initiative.

Through such engagements, we can improve understanding, build trust, forge a common sense of purpose, and work together to defend the way of life of our children, our grandchildren and our future generations.

Thank you very much.

News Release:

- Ong Ye Kung: Open and Inclusive Regional Architecture Helps Countries Co-exist and Prosper (MINDEF_20161011001.pdf)

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