

25 AUG 1997

# PRESS RELEASE

Release No.: 41/JUL09-1/97/07/30

97-JS-9

**SPEECH BY PROF S JAYAKUMAR,  
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND  
MINISTER FOR LAW, AT THE OPENING DINNER OF  
THE FOURTH HEADS OF MISSION MEETING,  
AT MANDARIN HOTEL  
ON WEDNESDAY, 30 JULY 1997 AT 7.30 PM**

In the 1970s when I was serving in the United Nations (UN), I met an impressive young diplomat. I wanted to host a working lunch, to get to know him a little better, discuss a few issues on the UN agenda. But my staff, noting that he was not an Ambassador, were concerned; going by strict protocol, an Ambassador should deal with Ambassadors. I decided to proceed with the lunch. I was impressed with him and felt he would go places. That young diplomat later rose to become his country's Foreign Minister.

This story illustrates the virtue of making as many friends as possible. More importantly, this is one of the fundamentals of Singapore's foreign policy.

Singapore has been fortunate. We were never meant to be an independent country. But when we were forced to become one more than thirty years ago, few expected us to last long. A small state in a volatile region, surrounded by bigger and more powerful neighbours, is always in danger of being trampled over. Yet, we not only survived but prospered.

Besides sheer luck, how did Singapore do it? Allow me to use this evening's dinner to reiterate some of the fundamental precepts of our foreign policy. I have already stated that one of these is Singapore will be friends with all who wish to be friends with us. The others are:

- We will remain non-aligned with regard to the rivalries of great powers.
- We will encourage the engagement of all major powers in the region so as to maintain a stable and peaceful balance.
- We will co-operate closely with ASEAN members to achieve regional cohesion, stability and progress. ASEAN is a cornerstone of our foreign policy.
- We will pragmatically work and trade with any state for mutual benefit.
- We will endeavour to be a good citizen of the international community.

These are commonsensical, not revolutionary, ideas. But they have served us well since the early years of our independence. There is no need to re-invent the wheel. I see no reason to abandon them, although they may require modification of emphasis every now and then. In fact, as our foreign policy agenda gets more and more crowded, we need to keep sight of the basics. Events nowadays unfold with breathtaking speed. Take the recent crisis in Cambodia. Within days, we had to react to a new and fluid political situation and evacuate 450 people out of danger's way. We must be clear

what are Singapore's vital interests, as well as where our own strengths and limitations lie.

As a small country, we have limited influence on the international environment: we respond to change, rather than initiate it. We must have a sound grasp of the geo-strategic picture so that we know how best to position ourselves. The global situation in 1994 when we last met was still fluid. Today, eight years after the end of the Cold War, international and Asia-Pacific relations are increasingly determined by the triangular relationship between the US, China and Japan. Although the outline may be clear, the outcome is uncertain.

The dynamics of international relations bear a striking resemblance to the laws of the jungle: not all creatures are created equal and only the fittest survive. The Darwinian theory of evolution prescribes that only those who can adapt - make themselves relevant - to the ever-evolving environment, survive and thrive. Singapore needs to constantly identify and occupy our ecological niche, so to speak.

A small country of three million people cannot aspire for greatness. It would be foolish for us to even try. But a small state can grow and occasionally, have some influence. Singapore has done so in the past two decades. Clearly, we do not belong to the heavyweight category but does this mean we will always be treated like a lightweight in the field of foreign policy? That others will never find us to be a useful or relevant player? Experience has shown that this is not always so. This was partly due to a fortuitous coincidence of favourable regional and international trends. But it was also because with a clear sense of priority, we had focused our limited resources in areas that mattered.

One key reason why our voice is occasionally heard is because of our success. Through excellent leadership, sound policies and productive citizens, Singapore has succeeded to an extraordinary degree. Although we have much to be proud of, we must not allow complacency to cloud our judgement.

With our neighbours catching up, Singapore's continued success cannot be taken for granted. The competition they pose will only intensify in the coming years. We need not despair at the tough challenges ahead because Singapore has never been better prepared to meet them. We are successful, prosperous and respected internationally. In the regional and global economy and in diplomatic forums, we have made from time to time useful contributions. We can continue to do well so long as we stay ahead and retain our edge. While meeting external challenges, we must also strengthen our core. To prevent things from falling apart, we must build a stable and cohesive society and educate generations who have not experienced the trauma of the nation's birth and who have known only prosperity.

From humble beginnings, the Singapore Foreign Service has grown both in strength and expertise. We have grown from 479 staff in 1994 to 645 in 1997. This number includes Ambassadors and High Commissioners we see before us tonight, right down to the man who makes the coffee. But compared to others around the world, the Singapore Foreign Service is still a modest outfit. We are still learning the ropes. Our aim is to mature into a professional and dedicated organisation.

Ambassadors and our overseas missions are, in a very real sense, Singapore's reconnaissance scouts. Moving ahead of the main formation, you observe the terrain and pitfalls, and then you report the information to your

commanders back home. You provide early warning of important undercurrents and larger forces driving policy in your host country. This will assist the formulation of policy and decision-making on the best course of action to protect and promote Singapore's interests. Once a decision is taken, you will have the task - sometimes pleasant, sometimes not - of implementing it. You are the interface between the Singapore government and her international counterparts.

But the terrain we are moving into in the next few years will be more complex and uncharted. Your antennae must be up and alert at all times.

The essence of foreign policy is the promotion of our national interests. But the practice of foreign policy is changing and becoming complicated. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) must adapt so as to stay relevant. For instance, advances in information technology and the Cable News Network (CNN) means that performing our conventional role of sending despatches on the latest political and economic developments is not enough. Today, we are able to listen to or watch news events even as they break out. The type of MFA reporting must be revised to make it useful even in a CNN-age.

I earlier alluded to the increased economic competition Singapore can be expected to face. MFA also has an important role to play. We must work in concert with the economic agencies to ensure that Singapore stays economically competitive and attractive. Ambassadors and our overseas missions need to engage in active commercial diplomacy. There is now a blurring of the dividing line between the domestic and international. MFA must also deal with environmental or labour issues that have become part of

the diplomatic agenda. As Singapore's external wing, we must constantly find ways to serve the country's national needs.

Given the speed at which the world moves, it is useful for our Ambassadors and High Commissioners to meet every few years to take stock of changes and address how we should prepare ourselves to deal with them. It is a routine but important marshalling of the troops. Using the established fundamentals of our foreign policy, your job is to assess whether policies and decisions taken a few years ago are still relevant and whether our priorities need to be redefined. This will ensure that MFA remains a dynamic organisation able to adapt and contribute to Singapore's continued survival and success.

Welcome back to Singapore. I wish all of you an eventful meeting.

@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@