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TRANSCRIPT OF THE ADDRESS BY EMERITUS SENIOR MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG TO THE SENATE OF THE PARLIAMENT, REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN: "TURNING VULNERABILITIES INTO STRENGTHS, TURNING RESOURCES INTO WEALTH" ON TUESDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER 2016, IN ASTANA, KAZAKHSTAN

His Excellency Kassym-Jomart Tokayev
Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Distinguished Members of the Senate

Introduction

I am indeed very honoured to address this august chamber through the gracious invitation of Chairman Tokayev. I am also happy to be able to honour my promise to President Nazarbayev to visit Kazakhstan.

2 I am impressed by what I have seen in Astana. The palpable vibrancy of the city reflects the vision of the Kazakh leadership in building an advanced and prosperous country in the heart of Eurasia. Having been in government, I can fully appreciate the complexity and challenges of developing a huge country like Kazakhstan.

3 The purpose of my visit is to strengthen bilateral relations. I hope to do this by having candid meetings with your leaders, acquiring a deeper understanding of your country and introducing Singapore to you.

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The Singapore Experience

4 I see many parallels between Singapore and Kazakhstan. We were both separated from far larger federations in times of great uncertainty. We were born under duress; our fates shrouded in uncertainty.

5 The period after the Second World War saw some three dozen countries gain independence. While some have done well, many have not. A few are worse off. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created another wave of new countries. Many have fared well, others not. The different paths travelled by all these countries offer rich lessons for us.

6 When Singapore became independent in 1965, our GDP per capita was USD 500. Today, it is USD 55,000, surpassing that of Britain, our colonial master. Other economic and social indicators also confirm Singapore's progress. For example, our literacy rate improved from 60% to 97% while life expectancy increased from 65 years to 83 years. 9 in 10 Singaporeans own their homes today, up threefold from after independence.

7 Some people have suggested that Singapore was able to make rapid progress because it is a small country; roughly the size of Astana. But I can say from experience that small countries have big headaches. Economic survival and security are perennial preoccupations for small countries. Many people see Singapore's shining success and forget the hard choices and sacrifices made. This, too, even for Singaporeans, as youthful memories of our past grow old.

Turning Vulnerabilities Into Strengths

8 Modern Kazakhstan is roughly half the age of Singapore. In 1965, independence was thrust upon us when Singapore separated from Malaysia. People, both within and outside Singapore, questioned if it could survive. We had no natural resources. Our economy was based on entrepot trade and low-skilled local industries. Our workforce had low literacy and few skills, and there was high unemployment. We were fractured along racial, language and religious fault lines, and situated in a tumultuous neighbourhood. We were inherently vulnerable as a sovereign state.

9 The Sydney Morning Herald, an Australian newspaper, concluded in August 1965: "An independent Singapore was not regarded as viable three years ago. Nothing in the current situation suggests that it is more viable today".

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10 Then we took off. Singapore's first 25 years under founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew became a well-told story of economic survival and nation building against all odds. I venture the first 25 years of our development as another parallel between Singapore and Kazakhstan today.

11 In 1990, I took over as the second Prime Minister, while Mr Lee took a back seat to guide the younger Ministers. By then, economic and political survival was no longer as stark. But there were new challenges to expand Singapore's diplomatic and economic space in a rapidly changing neighbourhood. I was also looking forward to evolve Singapore's political ethos to meet the challenging and changing expectations of a younger generation of Singaporeans born after independence.

12 After 14 years as PM, I passed the baton to the third and current Prime Minister in 2004. With the benefit of hindsight, allow me to share three insights.

13 First, there is no resource as valuable and integral to nation building as human resource. Singapore learnt this the hard way, bereft of any natural resource save for a poorly educated workforce. We had no choice but to "mine" our people by investing in their education and future. We rapidly built schools and trained a large number of teachers. We emphasised mathematics and science. We chose English as the main language of instruction and the work place, even though it was not commonly spoken by most of the Singaporean population. We did so because English was the global language of commerce and communication.

14 The difference between human resource and other natural resources like oil is this: The former is a growing asset, while the other is a depleting one. The more you invest in human capital, the more valuable it becomes. The more you mine natural resources, the less you have.

15 Second, institution building is key to unleashing the full potential of the state and the people. Singapore's organs of state – such as the Executive, Judiciary, and Parliament – are the pillars upon which we built Singapore's reputation and core values of excellence, meritocracy and integrity. It is our institutions that give long term confidence to both foreign investors and Singaporeans alike, and command a global premium for Singapore's brand name.

16 Third, leadership is the decisive edge paramount to all other factors. It provides the vision for the future, the inspiration to unite the people, the steel to enforce discipline, the organisation to deliver results, and the political skill to trade off competing demands. Unfortunately, strong leadership is also the hardest of the three to achieve and sustain, and consequently, a perennial preoccupation for Singaporean leaders.

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Importance of leadership and governance

17 Tracking the growth experience of the newly independent countries over the last half century, I have come to one main conclusion: good leadership and a united people are critical to the success of a country. A strong leader will unite the people and give them direction and purpose.

18 Singapore is probably unique in systematically planning its leadership succession. Being a small boat in the wide and often stormy ocean, we cannot leave the captaincy of the boat to chance or a popularity contest. Popularity is often mistaken for leadership. In Singapore, we emphasise competence, integrity and character.

19 Kazakhstan is fortunate to have a strong and decisive leader who gets things done, in President Nazarbayev. This is critical in the early years of a new country. Likewise, Singapore was fortunate to have Mr Lee Kuan Yew as our founding Prime Minister.

Kazakhstan – Turning Resources into Wealth

Excellences

20 At 25 years of age, Kazakhstan is a young country with an exciting future.

21 Unlike Singapore, the question for Kazakhstan is not how to turn vulnerabilities into strengths but rather how to transform its bountiful natural resources into higher standard of living on a sustainable basis.

22 President Nazarbayev once said: "The future is based on our current achievements. And in this sense, all that is done today creates opportunities for the future development." I believe the Kazakh Government is well aware of the challenges ahead and is creating opportunities for future sustainable growth. The 2050 Strategy's emphasis on economic diversification and building a knowledge-based economy and the Nurly Zhol (pronounced as nurle zhol) Economic Policy targeting development of infrastructure and civil service put Kazakhstan in good stead to prepare for the country's future.

Bilateral cooperation

23 While our countries are at two ends of the spectrum in terms of geographical size, our economies are complementary. Besides, we share similarities in terms of our vision and strategy. Our two countries can explore collaboration to maximise each other's strengths as hubs in their respective regions.

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24 Singapore seeks to strengthen economic relations with Kazakhstan through the Bilateral Investment Treaty and a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union. Beyond Singaporean companies investing in Kazakhstan, we should also explore ways to leverage on Singapore's reputation as an international financial centre, and encourage other Asian corporations to bring investments into Kazakhstan through Singapore.

25 There is definite potential for Singapore to work together with Kazakhstan in Central Asia on the One Belt One Road initiative. Both Singapore and Kazakhstan are key nodes on the New Silk Road. Singapore is already working with China on

the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative. This is the third government-to-government project between Singapore and China.

26 Singapore openly shares our experience in public governance and capacity-building. I am happy that Nazarbayev University has established a strong partnership with the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy to deliver a public policy programme. The Civil Service College of Singapore will also be signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Kazakh Academy of Public Administration on capacity building for government officials. However, replicating Singapore's model of governance may not be the best way forward due to differences in demographics, culture, history and context. This chamber knows best to distil best practices and experiences from all over the world, in order to evolve its own system of governance and path of development.

Conclusion

27 Let me conclude by thanking President Nazarbayev, the Kazakh Government and His Excellency, Senate Chairman Tokayev for their warm hospitality. I look forward to calling on the President tomorrow to continue the good discussions I had with Prime Minister Sagintayev yesterday. I hope my visit will boost relations and lead to greater collaboration for the mutual benefit of our countries and people.

28 Thank you and congratulations on your 25th Anniversary!

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