SPEECH BY MR. LIM HNG KIANG,
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ON "THE CHALLENGES TO SMALL NATIONS' FOREIGN POLICIES"
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History has rarely been kind to small nations. When we studied the history of the great empires of our times, it was the story of how larger nations invaded and occupied smaller and weaker ones. When we analysed the experience of Europe before the Second World War, it was a game of how big powers sought a balance of power among themselves and small nations were nothing more than pawns.

In the old days where size is might and might is right, the concept of a small nation seems implausible. Very few small nations have survived the course of history. Switzerland and Liechtenstein are fortuitous exceptions. It was not until the founding of the United Nations (UN) in the aftermath of World War II that small nations emerged as independent and credible actors in the international stage. The UN brought some order and predictability to an international system ravaged by two world wars. For the first time in history, there existed an international organisation that gave all nations, large and small, an equal voice and one vote. The Charter of the United Nations built a new system of collective security. This gave small nations a sense of hope and security for the future. Decolonization provided another boost for small nations. It increased the number of small nations from about a few dozen in 1945 to more than a hundred within two decades. It gave small nations strength through numbers. Today, there are more than 120 small nations representing a two-third majority at the United Nations.
The post-Cold War era has clearly demonstrated that there are limits to what the UN can do to maintain peace and security. The breakout of intra-state conflicts in many parts of the world and the failure of the UN in Bosnia, Rwanda and Burundi have seriously undermined the credibility of the organisation. It has questioned the effectiveness of the collective security system envisaged by the Charter of the UN. This is a cause of concern for all small nations. The lesson of Bosnia is that small nations cannot always rely on the UN to enforce the rule of law. The success of the UN and the allied forces in liberating Kuwait has now proved to be an exception rather than the norm. The UN cannot be expected to rescue every small nation that is in trouble. Neither would the big powers launch another Desert Storm operation to save a small nation. History has shown us that the big powers would act only if it is in their own interest to do so. Ultimately, all small nations must ensure their own survival and prosperity.

All small nations are hostages to an external environment that they cannot control. Yet they have to keep responding to an uncertain and constantly changing external environment. The basic foreign policy challenge for any small nation is therefore to influence the external environment in a manner that is favourable to its interests or, at worst, to limit any negative impact of the external environment on its survival and prosperity. There are five basic strategies that small nations can adopt to promote their survival and prosperity. Let me elaborate on each of them.

**Good Neighbour Policies**

A fundamental reality for any nation, small or large, is that it must learn to co-exist with its neighbours. This is a destiny imposed by geography. This reality is even more stark for small nations as they are inevitably surrounded by larger powers. Small nations must first of all convince their larger neighbours that it is in their mutual interest to build a cooperative relationship. They must build a network of symbiotic
relationships which result in economic and political cooperation for mutual benefit. The longer term objective is to create a climate of confidence and trust that will make cooperation more rewarding than hostility. This is not an easy thing to do and neither can it be done overnight. It is a slow and gradual process where both sides have a role to play.

Our relationship with Malaysia offers a good example. In the last decade, bilateral relations have matured and become more business-like. Our relationship has been built not only at the level of government but also at the level of the private sector. This has clearly strengthened the economic relationship which in turn provides a sound footing for political relations. There will of course be the occasional problem and hiccup. This is only to be expected among any friends or neighbours. The important thing is to manage these problems in the context of a mutually beneficial relationship, without damaging the overall relationship. For instance, Malaysia disputes Singapore's ownership of Pedra Branca. We have not been able to settle this issue between ourselves. But both countries have agreed to refer the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and to abide by the Court's judgement. This is an example of how both countries have managed to deal with an important and sensitive matter. This is the way that we should deal with differences and disputes that might occasionally arise. If an issue cannot be resolved bilaterally, it can be resolved impartially and amicably within the framework of international organisations and multilaterally-agreed rules.

Usefulness and Relevance

Secondly, small nations must be useful and relevant to the international community. There is no inherent reason why any small nation with limited natural resources should be of any importance to the regional and international community. Although some small nations can be of strategic importance, because of their location, most of them are marginalised in international affairs. It is therefore imperative for a small nation to work
extra hard to make itself useful and relevant to the global community. By making itself useful and relevant, a small nation can become an indispensable cog in the wheel of global politics, trade and commerce. This is one way of ensuring that its voice is heard in the international arena. It is also a way of ensuring that other nations have a stake in the survival of a small nation.

A small nation can make itself useful and relevant by playing a catalytic role on international economic and political issues. One concrete example of this role is our effort in initiating a summit meeting between leaders from Asia and Europe. It was an initiative that was first put forward by the Prime Minister (PM) when he visited France in October 1994. We realised that there was a real gap in the international community because there was no regular contact between the leaders of two of the most important regions of the world. We proposed the AEM in order to fill this gap by providing a forum for the informal exchange of ideas between the two regions. The proposal was endorsed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and members of the European Union (EU) who recognised the need for such a mechanism. Thailand has also agreed to host the meeting in early 1996. This is the type of bridging role that Singapore could and should continue to play. The AEM will not only strengthen ties between Europe and Asia, it would also intensify economic cooperation and expand markets for both regions.

Singapore has also played a constructive bridging role at the UN. Our diplomats at the UN have always helped to facilitate and build consensus. For instance, Singapore chaired the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea in the early 1980s. As a small nation without an extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), we had little vested interest in the exercise. However, it was in our interest to promote an internationally accepted regime to govern free passage in the high seas. Ambassador Tommy Koh was also involved in chairing the UN Conference on
Environment and Development. As a fairly successful developing country, we could understand the problems and concerns of both the developing and developed countries. This enabled us to play a facilitating role at the Rio Conference of 1992 which set the global standard for sustainable development. Our former Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Chew Tai Soo, was elected as one of the Vice-Chairman on the reform of the UN Security Council, an important exercise currently undertaken by the UN. He was also asked to lead the negotiations on the establishment of the post of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1993. Our Permanent Representative in Geneva, Ambassador Kesavapany, was elected Chairman of the General Council of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1994. While our small size gives us a definite advantage in terms of helping to build consensus at the UN, we cannot take this role for granted. We have to continue to make a serious and constructive contribution whenever possible. We also have to field our best diplomats for the job and ensure that they do Singapore proud.

Sense of Community

Thirdly, small nations must create a sense of community in their immediate region and beyond. This is one way a small nation can expand its economic and political space in the region and globally. It is also an important way of keeping the region stable and peaceful. ASEAN is an example of our effort to build a regional community. Since it was formed in 1967, ASEAN has entrenched a habit of consultation and cooperation among countries in the region. It has emerged as an anchor of stability in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. It provides a framework for mutually beneficial cooperation based on consensus. The ASEAN spirit exists not only at the level of leaders, it also extends to the level of officials and the private sector. ASEAN cooperation is not just confined to the political and economic sphere. Today, it extends to areas such as the environment, health, science and technology, tourism, drugs and public administration. The admission of Vietnam as the latest member of ASEAN is a significant development. It has
expanded the boundaries of the ASEAN community to Indochina. It is a matter of time before other Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar join ASEAN. In the long term, this will extend the ASEAN spirit, integrate the Southeast Asian region as a whole and make the organisation one of the most dynamic regional grouping in the world.

ASEAN recognised that the economic prosperity of Southeast Asia depended on a stable and secure environment. The ASEAN countries therefore agreed that additional mechanisms were required to maintain the security of the region. At the last Summit held in Singapore in 1992, ASEAN leaders decided to use existing mechanisms such as the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences (PMC) as a complementary means of enhancing regional dialogues on political and security matters. In July 1993, ASEAN and its regional partners took a major step forward when they decided to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The ARF is a unique forum that brings together the leaders of eighteen countries representing all the major actors in the Asia-Pacific region. It has a critical role to play in preserving the peaceful and stable environment that has allowed the phenomenal growth to take place in the region. It provides a mechanism for all countries in the region to discuss sensitive issues in a constructive and non-confrontational way. It is also a way of engaging the big powers in the security of the region. This is not only in the interest of small nations like Singapore but also all the countries in the region.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is another layer of community in Singapore's foreign policy. Launched in 1989, it brings together in one forum all the dynamic economies in the Asia-Pacific region. It aims to promote economic cooperation through action-oriented programmes. It has primarily focused on trade liberalisation, trade facilitation and development cooperation. APEC has emerged as a dynamic and effective organisation. It offers a framework to manage trade-related issues and to enhance trade linkages among member
countries. It will further strengthen the economic dynamism of the region and enhance global trade liberalisation by accelerating the elimination of barriers that hinder trade and investment flows. Greater intra-APEC trade and investment flows will benefit Singapore and all the APEC economies. We have strongly supported the APEC process and will continue to do so. In our view, APEC not only offers a framework for intensifying regional economic cooperation, it also provides a mechanism to engage the larger powers to remain committed to the economic growth and prosperity of the region.

Multilateral Organisations

Fourthly, an international system based on the rule of law is of critical importance to all small nations. While the United Nations is a much maligned organisation, it is the only universal system of collective security that we have in the world today. While it has not always been completely effective, the alternative is not to do away with the UN. The United Nations plays an important role in building international consensus on important issues. It also plays an important role in maintaining some semblance of law and order. It marks the difference between an international system governed by the law of the jungle and the rule of law. This is a critical distinction for small nations like Singapore. Other multilateral organisations such as the WTO play an important part in the foreign policy of small nations. Such organisations help to make the international system more predictable and rule-based and thus less uncertain.

As a small nation, Singapore has always been strongly supportive of the role of the UN in international affairs. The UN gives all nations, small or big, an equal voice in the international arena. The UN gives small nations a vehicle to explain their policies and seek support for their positions. It provides them an opportunity to shape international opinion and influence the international agenda. Ultimately, it could also play an important role protecting the sovereignty and independence of small nations. We have participated actively in
UN peacekeeping operations as they represent an important activity of the UN to maintain international peace and security. In spite of our limited human resources, we have provided personnel and equipment for several UN operations in Namibia, Angola, Cambodia and Kuwait. We will continue to do so within the limits of our resources. Singapore recently announced its bid to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period 2001-2002. This is an important and major step for Singapore. We have never served in the Security Council before. But we have decided to do so because it is in the interest of small nations like Singapore to support the role of the Security Council and ensure that it functions in an effective and efficient manner.

Defence and Deterrence

Diplomacy is a key element in the foreign policy of all small nations. But diplomacy is no substitute for good defence and deterrence. Let us not forget that we live in an international system composed of sovereign states competing for advantage. Every nation wants to do what it best for its own interest, not what is necessarily right or moral. It is naive to believe that nations are peaceful and law abiding because it is ethical to do so. Nations are often peaceful because it is too painful or costly to be not peaceful.

A small nation can never take its security for granted. Neither can it count on the international community or its friend and allies to come to the rescue. It is therefore the responsibility of every small nation to take its defence seriously. Every citizen has a role to play in the defence of a small nation. The ultimate defence for any small nations in internal resilience. Its people must be cohesive and united for a common purpose. This is critical because a small nation can never match the military strength and numbers of the big powers. It cannot therefore afford to be internally weak and divided. It must pursue a strategy that will make it costly and painful for any potential aggressor. A credible deterrence will depend
on a viable defence. Small nations must therefore be prepared to pay the price of maintaining a strong armed forces. They must mobilise a larger proportion of their resources than their potential opponents, their forces must be better trained and better equipped. Small nations must also adopt a total approach to defence that incorporates civil defence and psychological defence. A policy of defence and deterrence does not mean that a small nation is in danger of being invaded by its neighbours. Neither does it imply that there is no trust and confidence between a small nation and its neighbours. On the contrary, a strong defence is necessary to build confidence among neighbours.

The options open to small nations are inevitably limited. We do not have the necessary resources or power to control the external environment. At the same time, our fortunes are tied to the vicissitudes of this external environment. A small nation could choose to be swept along with the flow of international currents. Or it could choose to steer a path that would enable it control its direction and ride the rapids. A small nation will never be able to dictate the international agenda. But what it can and must do is to try and influence the international agenda in order to maximise its options and ensure its survival and prosperity.