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**SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW  
AT THE SINGAPORE ARMED FORCES DAY DINNER HELD AT ISTANA  
ON THURSDAY, 2 JULY 1987**

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INTRODUCTION

We gather tonight to celebrate the 20th Year of National Service. The SAF is coming of age.

From humble beginnings, the SAF today is a credible force, a deterrent that will give any aggressor reason to pause. All of you have contributed to the development of the SAF. You can be proud of your work.

Now it is time to take stock and to forecast and prepare for the next 20 years. The fundamentals making up our security and stability remain unchanged.

Let me recount these fundamentals.

SECURITY AND STABILITY

Singapore is what it is today because the SAF was able to build up in time to fill the role the British, with the Australians and New Zealanders, fulfilled from

1945. In January 1968, the British announced their withdrawal. By January 1971, they wound up their Far East Command. Stability does not come naturally to Singapore. We cannot count on springing back on our feet if we are knocked off balance. We are peculiarly vulnerable. If our balance of security and stability is shattered, it is doubtful if we on our own can ever put Singapore together again. The difficulties in the way of Sri Lanka re-establishing some state of peace for reconstruction are trifling compared to what it would take to put Singapore together again if ever we come apart. This is why we are ready to pay a high premium for safety.

That we have enjoyed peace in the last two decades was not accidental. We did not leave everything to fortune.

#### FUNDAMENTALS OF EXTERNAL SECURITY

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We do not consider our neighbours in South-East Asia to be threats to our security. There will always be differences in national interests and perceptions but, so long as the governments and leaders of Southeast Asia are rational, these differences will not lead to armed conflict. The external threats to our security are likely to come from irrational and extremist forces, or from expansionist regimes backed by a big power.

Unfortunately, we have had to live with not so rational leaders in the past. When Sukarno mounted "Confrontation" against Malaysia (including Singapore) from 1963, we depended on the British to defend us. "Confrontation" ended in 1966 only because a rational leader in President Suharto took over.

Fortunately, under President Suharto, Indonesia has established secular politics. All parties have to subscribe to the national ideology of Pancasila. Indonesia has succeeded in keeping all religions, including Islamic fundamentalism, out of the politics of elections. With Indonesia establishing a secular form of politics, it can be a moderating influence on Muslim fundamentalism.

Fortunately also when Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia in December 1978, her backing from the Soviet Union was effectively countered by the backing Thailand has received. China, ASEAN, the US, Japan, the European Community, and nearly all the non-Communist members of the UN have demanded that the Vietnamese withdraw from Cambodia.

#### FUNDAMENTAL OF INTERNAL SECURITY

The internal threat to our security comes from communism. Although the forms may be changed, the basics are no different.

The objective of the communists remains the same. They want to capture power and establish a classless society. They are committed to subversion and violence to overthrow the Government. They do not believe they can win through the ballot-box. Their modus operandi in Singapore at present is to work through front organisations. The CPM have kept their underground organisations intact, including their assassination squads and their guerilla forces both in the Peninsula and on the Thai-Malaysian border. The recent example showed that they were using the Catholic Church and its organisations as front organisations.

If we are vigilant and firm, they can be contained. The trouble is our security has always been closely linked to that of Malaysia. If the communists can also exploit communal and religious differences in Malaysia, they may re-establish a broad united front with mass following. Then their threat to Singapore will again become serious.

Communalism is a latent problem in the make-up of our population. Communalists and religious fanatics can, from time to time, work up racial and religious passions and ordinary people can be carried along. We cannot have our

minority races worked up and pitted in hatred or fear against the majority, or have one religion so zealous for converts, or so intolerant, that they have open friction with other religions. Any communal or religious collision will be nasty and costly. Our history is besplattered with such outbursts. The racial harmony we have enjoyed since the last outburst in 1969 cannot be taken for granted.

### OUR BASIC APPROACH

Our basic approach is never to allow fears and tensions to grow and mount in intensity. Early preventive action can forestall an ugly build-up. So whether it is a communist conspiracy to create pressure points for mass action, or growing interracial or interreligious frictions and tension, they have to be defused early.

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With a 75 per cent Chinese majority in Singapore, it is easy to work up Chinese sentiments and to get power on the strength of the Chinese vote. We eschewed the tactic. And we stopped others from doing so. Instead, we persuaded the Chinese to accept bilingualism with English as the first language. So we have avoided racial polarisation. This is no mean achievement.

Our aim is a multiracial, multireligious, and multilingual society which can eventually become a tolerant nation. We believe in equal opportunities, regardless of race, language, or religion. Our objective is national integration, not assimilation of minorities by the majority race, culture, or language.

We have made much progress. But we shall need another one to two generations before our national unity is able to stand severe racial or religious stress. Nationhood cannot be achieved by pressure-cooking.

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## THE ROLE OF THE SAF

Recent events in Malaysia over the Herzog visit to Singapore highlight how quickly tension can escalate. A few leaders were aware that this emotional working up could prejudice long-term Malaysia-Singapore relations. They tried

to lessen the risk of things going out of hand by signalling that things were not so bad and that there would be a return to business as usual.

In the defence area, interactions between MAF and SAF were, with a few limited exceptions, not interrupted. The Five-Power Air Defence Exercise (ADEX) and the bilateral naval exercise (EX MALAPURA) were held as scheduled. Our Air Force deployed F5s to Butterworth for the ADEX as planned. Official visits to both countries continued.

Several years of working together have established channels of communications which enabled us to keep a cool exchange going, despite the heat and pressure as feelings were worked up by demonstrations and chauvinistic rhetoric, amplified by the mass media.

The regular interactions between the respective armed forces will help keep channels of communication open even during periods of political misunderstanding and tension. If our interests coincide, there can be cooperation. If there are differences, we must try to reconcile them. If the gap remains too big to bridge, we can take note of the problem and put it aside to be resolved later. This is the way our defence relations with Malaysia, Indonesia

and Thailand have improved. The SAF has built up constructive relationships. You should continue to develop them.

## CONCLUSION

The external and internal threats to Singapore remain much the same. The next 20 years could see these threats emerging in new forms, but the basics are unlikely to change. Internally, we have to be on our guard against communism and communalism. Externally, we have to watch out for fanatic or extremist forces. For internal stability we need a sensitive ISD and an intelligent police force. For external security we need a strong SAF.

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