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cc: (bcc: NHB NASReg/NHB/SINGOV)
Subject: Remarks by Prof S Jayakumar during Parliamentary Debate, 8 Mar 00

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

Media Division, Ministry of Information and the Arts, #36-00 PSA Building, 460 Alexandra Road,
Singapore 119963. Tel: 3757794/5

For assistance call 3757795

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Remarks by Foreign Minister Prof S Jayakumar during the Parliamentary Debate on the Allocations for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Committee of Supply, Wed 8 Mar 2000.

Question by Dr Ong Chit Chung, MP:

The Asia-Pacific region has been through a series of political upheavals and economic meltdown. Old leaders like Suharto have been swept away. Old icons are gone. Old paradigms are no longer valid or relevant.

It is a new millennium. A new era. The strategic parameters have changed.

At the same time, the situation has somewhat stabilized, after the election of Gus Dur as President of Indonesia. The sense of crisis is not so pronounced, though not all issues have been resolved.

What then can we make of this new scenario? Where are the new fault lines?

How has the balance of power shifted? What are the interests and agendas of the big powers like the United States, China and Japan?

These are some of the questions and issue I wish to pose to the Minister. What is the Minister's reading of the current strategic situation?

As the Chinese words for crisis, "Wei Chi" show, where there are dangers, there are also opportunities.

I believe that Singapore has done well and is in a stronger position after the crisis. By comparison, Singapore has emerged stronger economically, remained politically cohesive and has the resources to continue to upgrade our defence capabilities.

Singapore, though small, is like the mouse deer: nimble, agile and strong, able to deal with any tricky situation, and able to fight back, if necessary.

I remember Dr Habibie liked to call Singapore the “tiny red dot”. I think he is mistaken: it is the mighty beacon of light, shining across the seas.

But we have to be vigilant. Today’s friends may be tomorrow’s enemies, only permanent interests. And, if I may add, interests may change over time.

May I ask the Minister what useful roles can Singapore play to promote peace, stability and economic development in our region.

Reply by Minister Jayakumar:

Strategic Situation

It might be useful for me to respond to his question on strategic situation before members speak on specific country related topics. As to his request for my reading on strategic situation, I will like to start off by saying that the backdrop for our assessment of strategic situation is the state of the triangular relationship between United States, China and Japan. As I have said in this house before, this relationship is critical for the external environment in South East Asia. Fortunately, this relationship is stable for now, but there are stresses and strains which can pose a challenge to security and stability in the Asia Pacific and it may be useful for me to briefly touch on the various aspects of this triangular relationship.

US-China Relations

If you take United States and China relations which is the key aspect of the triangular , I would say that last year as a result of the rough patch which US-China relations went through, this was a worrisome aspect particularly as a result of the bombing of the China Embassy in Belgrade as well as the failure to conclude the US China WTO agreement when Premier Zhu Rongji visited US in May of 1999. However, with the conclusion of the US China negotiations on the WTO more recently, I think we can say the relations are generally back on track but there are two issues which potentially can affect US-China relations.

But there are two issues which potentially can seriously affect US-China relations: First the Taiwan issue and second the granting of Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for China by the US. The Taiwan issue is the most sensitive issue which could derail US-China relations. The stakes are high. And we must remember that this is a year of political transitions – with the Presidential elections in Taiwan as well as in the US and therefore, it is important for all parties –

China, Taiwan and the US – to make even greater effort to keep temperatures low, and to keep relations on an even keel.

We therefore hope that all parties will avoid words and deeds that could potentially lead to an explosive outcome which will not be in the interest of all of us, not in Taiwan's interest, not China's interest, not America's interest or the region's interest.

We believe that the Clinton Administration is aware of the importance of granting PNTR to China. It is making tremendous efforts to get Congressional approval for PNTR for China. We hope that the Administration will succeed in persuading Congress because the conclusion of the WTO agreement with China was a very important milestone. China's decision to join WTO was significant. It represented a political and strategic decision to integrate itself into the globalised world economy. It also demonstrated a high-level commitment to continue necessary but painful domestic reforms. By concluding the agreement, the US has shown that it understands the importance of integrating China into the world economy, and the benefits to US business.

US-Japan relations

The next aspect of the triangular of course is the US-Japan relationship which I would say, remains strong. The US-Japan alliance still serves the interests of both parties. However, its future orientation will be affected by the domestic mood in Japan as well as regional geopolitical environment. We believe that Japan has a key role to play in the region because of its economic strength. Japan was active in helping countries in Asia during the financial crisis. Over the longer term, Japan can play a greater role in the region, within the context of a strong US-Japan security alliance.

Japan-China relations

Now on the third side of the triangle, the Japan-China relations, they are also important part. There are signs that they are trying to move their relations forward. They made significant progress during Japanese PM Obuchi's visit to China in 1999. Both countries wish to set their relations on the path of joint cooperation which is good for the region.

I thought we should mention an interesting development that there are

signs of warming of ties among the Northeast Asia powers - China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. The leaders of these countries in fact had a historic meeting at the fringes of the ASEAN+3 Summit in Manila in November last year and this was followed by other meetings. For example, their Environment Ministers met twice in Seoul and Beijing to discuss cooperation in environmental protection. I think this is a positive development, if the drawing together of the Northeast Asian powers results in rapprochement, the reduction of tensions in Asia, and the reinforcement of the US-China-Japan triangular relationship.

The strengthening of this triangular relationship between US, China and Japan will help to ensure a peaceful and stable balance of power in the region. The US' role is the key to the regional balance. As you know, Singapore has continued to reiterate the importance of a continued US presence in the region. It is the pre-eminent power in the region, and the world, and only it can ensure that the triangular relationship remains stable.

The US, in our view, has historically played an important role in Asia. In the post-Cold War era, the US role remains important. A stable strategic environment in Asia is a pre-requisite for a prosperous Asia but which is buttressed by open markets and competition.

POTENTIAL FLASHPOINTS

South China Sea

Having given this backdrop of the strategic situation, let me also flag that there are potential flashpoints which we need to manage very carefully. I have mentioned this previously but to update members, first, there is the potential flashpoint of the South China Sea. The South China Sea remains a potential flashpoint because there are so many claimant states of various islands, atolls and reefs and we saw during the past year some incidents involving some of the claimant states not only between Philippines and China, but also between ASEAN claimant states, namely the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia.

I do not think there is any immediate danger of outbreak of hostilities, but there is always the concern that accidents could happen. It is important that all the claimants continue to act with restraint, to settle their differences peacefully without resort to use of force, and more importantly from the viewpoint of non-claimant states like us to respect international law concerning navigational routes and freedom of passage.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) which I might add is trying to work

out a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.

South Asia

Another potential flashpoint is South Asia. Relations between India and Pakistan took a downward turn in the past year over the Kargil conflict in May 99, Pakistan Chief Executive Musharaff's assumption of power in Nov 99 and the hijack of the Indian Airlines plane in Dec 99. Since both countries have nuclear weapons, events in the region clearly could have reverberations for the rest of Asia, if not the world at large.

Korean Peninsula

The Korean Peninsula also is a potential flashpoint, remains unpredictable. Any tension can quickly escalate, and can affect the rest of Asia as was evidenced by the naval skirmishes in the Yellow Sea last year between North Korea and Japan, and between North Korea and South Korea. On the other hand, efforts to improve the situation have continued. Most notably, the US-North Korea dialogue, which started in Sep 99, have been yielding some positive results such as a de facto freeze in North Korea's missile-testing programme and plans for North Korean Vice Foreign Minister to make the first high-level visit from North Korea to the US. South Korea on its part remains committed to President Kim Dae Jung's 1998 "Sunshine Policy" and Japan is also looking to normalise relations with North Korea.

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Cross Straits Tensions

Another flashpoint of course is the Cross Straits tensions. This is another area of uncertainty. Beijing has, in the recently-released White Paper on Taiwan, formally made it known that it would resort to the use of force if Taipei delays negotiations on reunification. The situation is likely to be aggravated by election politics in the US. However, since the release of the White Paper, Beijing, Taipei and Washington appeared to have exercised restraint and not escalated tensions further. The role and approach taken by the US towards both Beijing and Taipei will continue to be crucial.

Conclusion

If I were to sum up the strategic situation, I think we can say that there are signs that Asia is recovering from the financial crisis. The triangular relationship among the US, China and Japan remain relatively stable but there continue to be several potential flashpoints which we need to watch and manage carefully. As to Mr Ong Chit Chung's question as to the role of Singapore in this regard, I would say first that for Singapore, a small country to be able to develop and progress in the future as we have done in the past a benign favourable stable external environment in the region is critical. Therefore we have an interest in ensuring the engagement of all the key players in as many forums as possible. Thus, Singapore's role should continue to be helpful in ASEAN+3 Forum, as well as in the ASEAN Regional Forum to try to engage the critical players - the US, Japan and Korea, as well as others like Russia, Australia, New Zealand, which are dialogue partners to sit together at the table and to discuss common security issues. I notice that there is a cut further down on the ASEAN Regional Forum and we can discuss further on this. Equally important is the ability of Singapore to be alert to changing trends, shifting currents, new alignments so that we will not be caught by surprise, a point made by Mr Ong Chit Chung himself. This is absolutely important. International events alliances and trends are never static. They keep changing. Singapore must be alert. We must note changing trends, be able to adjust way ahead of time. If we can do that, then I think we will be more prepared for new situations and as I described, the strategic situation this year is quite different from what I described in last year's Committee of Supply.

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