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AND MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, TO THE SINGAPORE  
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MARINA MANDARIN

## CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN SINGAPORE'S FOREIGN POLICY

I am grateful to be given the opportunity to speak to you today. My subject is "Continuity and Change in Singapore's Foreign Policy". A few weeks ago, the staff of the Foreign Ministry held a farewell dinner for Mr Rajaratnam, Mr Dhanabalan and Mr Yeo Cheow Tong. On that occasion Mr Rajaratnam, our first Foreign Minister and the architect of Singapore's foreign policy, provided an insight into the origins of Singapore's foreign policy which will no doubt keep future generations of historians busy.

He recalled that in 1965 after separation from Malaysia, the Prime Minister called him; told him that Singapore now needed a Foreign Minister and that he had been chosen. Mr Rajaratnam was going to be interviewed by the press in a few days' time. He asked the Prime Minister what Singapore's foreign policy should be. The Prime Minister replied "Raja, you had better wear a tie and a lounge suit. That's most important. Then after that, you just say what comes to the top of your head".

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very grateful that I was spared such a traumatic start. I was in the Foreign Ministry as Second Minister for almost two years before I assumed the post of Foreign Minister and I have learned always to keep a suit hanging in my office closet. And 23 years after the Foreign Ministry was established, its Minister should feel comfortable enough to face the press without a lounge suit.

More seriously, I was fortunate to inherit an accumulated body of wisdom, experience and established policy from my predecessors. From its humble beginnings, the foreign service has also acquired greater

professionalism and the foreign policy making process is today more institutionalised. Of course, compared with more established Foreign Ministries, we still have a very small staff and are still learning. It may interest you to learn that the total number of people in the Foreign Ministry, whether in our missions overseas or in headquarters in Singapore, is only 370.

This number includes everyone from the most distinguished of our Ambassadors to the chap who makes the coffee. That, incidentally, is not an inconsequential job. There are those who say he keeps the Ministry running and helps to quench the thirst of foreign visitors who make their way to the 39th floor of Raffles City.

Apart from coffee to keep overworked foreign service officers awake, running foreign policy on a shoestring also requires a clear sense of priorities in order to make best use of limited resources. The criterion is always Singapore's national interest. The object is to identify the real interest and find means of pursuing it; given the inherent and inescapable limitations of a small state, whose ability to shape its environment is necessarily constrained. To recognise limitations is not to be passive. No state is entirely free of external constraints. No state is totally restricted by circumstances. Between what presently exists and what must ultimately be accepted lies a margin of possibilities. We operate in that margin. To do so there is a continuing need for alertness and flexibility in Singapore's diplomacy; or as some would say, for nimble footwork.

What I would like to do this afternoon is to share with you my sense of what have been the most significant results of more than two decades of nimble footwork, trial and error and not a little sheer luck. I believe that there have been three major achievements, which are also Singapore's permanent national interests. These are:-

- (i) the protection of Singapore's sovereignty and independence;
- (ii) the fostering of ASEAN cooperation; and
- (iii) the maintenance of a stable balance of power in Southeast Asia.

Singapore's permanent national interests are not the personal whims of individual Ministers or the government of the day. These interests are fundamental to our continued peace and progress. Irrespective of whoever holds the office of Foreign Minister, they will always remain Singapore's basic interests. Let me elaborate on these permanent national interests.

Firstly, Singapore has been accepted as a sovereign and legitimate member of the international community. This may not seem very much, but small countries can never take their sovereignty for granted. Indeed, given the origins of independent Singapore, it is a considerable achievement.

Perhaps the point would be clearer if I ask you to try and imagine an international system that did not contain an independent United States of America or an independent Soviet Union. This is almost impossible. Barring a nuclear catastrophe, in one form or another, the United States and the Soviet Union will always exist. But there is no difficulty imagining an international system without a small country like Singapore.

Anyone born in Singapore over the age of thirty has held three citizenships in his or her lifetime: British subject, Malaysian citizen and now Singaporean. We have to ensure that we will stop at three. The vulnerability of small states is a fact of life. Singapore's independent existence is today widely recognised. But to assure our basic security, we can never allow tests to our sovereignty and internal affairs, even when well-intentioned, to go unchallenged. Even today, we have had occasionally to remind other countries to leave us alone to be ourselves.

Secondly, we enjoy good relations with our neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, and with other members of ASEAN. It is easy to be cynical about ASEAN or to take it for granted. This is a mistake. Its emergence as a viable and credible regional organisation is unique in the Third World. Good relations with our neighbours and ASEAN's success have assured us a stable regional environment and have allowed us to channel our energies and resources into development and to creating a better life for our people. This too is not to be taken for granted.

Southeast Asia is a strategically important region made up of diverse countries. Historically, the

characteristic dynamic of Southeast Asia has been conflict. In 1965, when Singapore became independent, every member of ASEAN was at loggerheads with some other member of ASEAN. Today, the potentially most divisive disputes of the 1960s - Indonesia's confrontation of Malaysia and Singapore; the Philippines claim to Sabah; the Thai-Malaysia and Indonesia-Philippines border disputes and the separation of Malaysia and Singapore - have all become irrelevant or have been considerably muted.

This is something that Singapore and every member of ASEAN can congratulate ourselves for. In Southeast Asia, stability is not a natural state of affairs, but the result of conscious policy decisions. Every member of ASEAN has had to work hard, to seek accommodation and compromise and at times make considerable sacrifices, to ensure peace and stability in the region. Without ASEAN life for Singapore would be far more uncomfortable.

Thirdly, despite the American withdrawal from mainland Southeast Asia and the fall of Indochina to the communists, a stable strategic balance of power has been maintained in Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 was a rude reminder of the consequences of instability in the regional strategic balance; threatening Thai security and, through Thailand, ASEAN's cohesion. But the non-communist states of the region quickly recovered from the initial shocks, held together and forged ahead. Thailand in 1988 is a very different country from Thailand in 1975 or 1978; politically and economically more robust and more confident. The thrust of Vietnamese military expansionism has been blunted. In Cambodia, the Vietnamese have learned that military force is not the solution to every problem and are now looking for a political settlement that will give them an honourable way out. These outcomes were not preordained.

It is difficult today to recall how bleak the prospects seemed in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1975-1978. That we have to strain our memories is itself a measure of success. The US has remained an essential element of the Southeast Asian balance of power with important permanent interests in the region. The US is and will remain an important stabilising influence. In this respect, the election of George Bush as President of the United States provides a welcome and reassuring dimension of continuity. The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) too have contributed to the effort to maintain regional stability.

I cannot and do not claim that Singapore alone was responsible for the stabilisation of the Southeast Asian strategic balance. The main players are in a different league. An honest assessment must acknowledge that it was partly the result of good fortune. But it was not only a matter of luck. Maintaining a stable strategic balance in Southeast Asia was vital as without it we would not have been able to develop and prosper. As a small state our capabilities are limited. But when our vital interests are engaged, it is not Singapore's practice merely to acquiesce in events; or trust in the benevolence of the Gods of international politics; or await a favourable conjugation of the planets.

We adopted a pragmatic policy of working with any state, irrespective of ideology, whose interests coincided with our own. Together with our ASEAN partners, the FPDA and other countries with whom we shared common interests, Singapore did what it could to contribute to the common defence; to encourage a continued US presence; to bolster Thai security and to prevent a military fait accompli in Cambodia. I do not think it would be unrealistic or immodest for us to claim at least a small portion of responsibility for the happy outcome.

Events are still unfolding. In the years ahead, we will have to find new ways of protecting and advancing what I have identified as Singapore's permanent national interests under new circumstances.

In Southeast Asia, every member of ASEAN is undergoing political change. The changes are not merely of leaders but of entire political generations. These transitions are inevitable. Each ASEAN country is managing political change in its own way, in accordance with its own culture and political traditions. There is no reason to doubt that these transitions will be successful. But by their very nature, the outcome of such processes cannot be taken for granted.

The transitions currently underway will have profound consequences for the region. It is essential to ensure that successor generations who have no memories of past conflicts do not take the stability and peace of the last twenty years for granted. As President Soeharto told the Third ASEAN Summit in Manila last year, "to forge an ASEAN sense of cohesiveness in a wider public, particularly

for future generations, ASEAN must be able to develop a sense of ASEAN cohesiveness so that it will always commonly belong to the society, age after age".

The uncertainties underscore the need to forge personal and institutional links at all levels with the ASEAN countries, building on the foundations that have already been established. In an uncertain world, ASEAN is the rock on which we must anchor our national survival and progress. Malaysia and Indonesia are of special significance to Singapore. The younger leaders in Singapore have consciously worked towards maintaining the pragmatic working relationships with their counterparts enjoyed by older leaders and eventually developing their own close personal ties based on confidence and trust.

Farther afield, exciting changes are underway in China and the Soviet Union. The attempts by Mr Deng Xiaoping and Mr Gorbachev to reform their communist systems and to normalise relations between their countries, are among the most significant developments of the post war period. The process is well advanced in China and slowly gaining momentum in the Soviet Union.

The consequences could be momentous. Reformist communism has already brought a greater calm to international politics. Although we do not have diplomatic relations with the PRC and do not intend to have diplomatic relations until our close neighbour has done so, economic links with China are established. Our relations with the Soviet Union are correct. However, "Perestroika" and "Glasnost" are opening the door for better political and economic ties with the Soviet Union and East Europe. The resolution of regional problems such as Cambodia will create further opportunities for extending relations. At the same time, a new regional political and strategic equation may develop out of Sino-Soviet normalisation which could change the Southeast Asian strategic landscape in ways that, while not necessarily negative, are still uncertain. But we are not frozen in our attitude and will respond appropriately when positive developments are clearer.

We wish Mr Deng Xiaoping and Mr Gorbachev well in their bold economic experiments. It is in our interest that they succeed. But it is also important to remember that while the relevance of Marxism is being questioned, Leninism is alive and well. Leninism is not an utopian ideology, but

a blueprint for seizing and maintaining power. The ruling communist parties of both China and the Soviet Union will not relinquish their control over these countries. Similarly, the MCP, the CPT and the remnants of the PKI are clinging to their dreams of power in Southeast Asia. As China and the Soviet Union are turning inward, Southeast Asian communists are looking elsewhere for aid and inspiration. In the Philippines, there is clear evidence that the NPA is receiving aid and support from various groups in some western countries. In Singapore, local Marxists also had links with and tried to emulate the NPA, using church and social organisations as their cover and receiving support from outside Singapore. There is a continual need for alertness and firmness in both our foreign and domestic policies.

As the region and the world change, Singapore is also evolving. We have now come to be classified as one of the newly industrialising economies (NIE), together with South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The colourful imagery of the "Four Tigers" or "Four Dragons" has mesmerised policy-makers and journalists in developed countries into treating Singapore in a simplistic manner, lumping it with the very different economies of South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The evocative labels that have been used to describe the Asian NIEs - Four Tigers, Four Dragons, Little Japans - convey the mixture of admiration and suspicion, both often equally misplaced, with which they are regarded.

But there are obvious differences between Singapore and the other NIEs. The principal difference is that Singapore is a sovereign state that for all practical purposes has accepted the obligations of membership in a global economy: it is an open free market economy that plays by the rules. We have urged the NIEs to live up to their responsibilities and done our part. We do not have the capability to play a leading role, but can and have nudged events along. We shall gladly consult with the NIEs and developed countries on the smooth integration of emergent economies into the OECD economic grid. But we shall not accept arbitrary political pressure, and we shall expect developed countries to live up to their own professed standards of free and fair trade.

Singapore's contribution need not be solely economic. Power relationships are being reordered in the

Asia Pacific region. Singapore's national defence capability is making a modest contribution to the security of Southeast Asia. We believe that a Singapore capable of defending itself is necessary for regional security. It can cooperate with and contribute to the security of our neighbours. As our defence forces evolve and political relationships mature, it becomes possible to explore new ways for regional states to contribute to regional security in response to the changing strategic equation among the major powers. Living cheek by jowl with each other, the security of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia is indivisible. Thailand's security affects all of us as well. ASEAN is not a security organisation. But there could be more bilateral military exercises, which over the long term could be expanded to become overlapping trilateral exercises. There may perhaps also be a need to explore more broadly based means of contributing to the common defence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I fear that I may have rather ungraciously repaid your hospitality by speaking for too long. But I may disappoint some of you if I leave the subject of Singapore foreign policy without at least a few words on the Cambodian problem. I have left Cambodia to the last because there is a misperception that Singapore's foreign policy is only the Cambodian problem. What I have tried to do today is to give you a sense of the broad range of Singapore's foreign policy preoccupations and see Cambodia in perspective.

The Cambodian situation has entered a more fluid phase. The Soviet Union and China are discussing Cambodia seriously. The Sino-Soviet discussions are opaque but it is evident that both sides have displayed new flexibility. Vietnam is coming to realise that if it is to reform its economy, there must be a political settlement. Prince Sihanouk has had three rounds of talks with Hun Sen and, although the last was a disappointment, the channel of communication remains open. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam, the Cambodian factions and other interested regional states have engaged in a dialogue through the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM) process. These developments make the prospects for a settlement better than at any other time in the last decade.

Not being clairvoyant I cannot predict the shape of the final settlement. There are still significant differences in the positions of the parties to the conflict.

Vietnam is still hesitant to negotiate seriously. But sooner or later Vietnam will have to do so. Its present situation is just not sustainable. It is in Vietnam's own interest that a settlement comes sooner rather than later. A settlement that will be durable must be a genuine compromise; neither a Soviet nor a Vietnamese nor a Chinese victory; with neither Khmer Rouge nor the Heng Samrin faction dominating. A viable settlement must also be guaranteed by the great powers. For this reason, it is essential to find means of integrating the various processes that are currently underway, in particular to bring the great powers into the regional dialogue.

Prince Sihanouk represents the best hope for lasting peace and stability in Cambodia. All parties have recognised his preeminent role. Whatever may be agreed between China and the Soviet Union or through the JIM process must ultimately find its expression in a settlement that is acceptable to Prince Sihanouk. Singapore remains committed to providing Prince Sihanouk and the non-communist resistance all practical support and assistance to enable them to stand up to both the Khmer Rouge and the Heng Samrin forces.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am quite aware that I may have raised more questions than provided answers. This is inevitable given the nature of foreign policy as a process without an end in which, more often than not, there are no certainties or clear answers. The results of an effective foreign policy can only be intangibly felt in the long term. But as I have tried to explain, there are clear permanent interests that can and have been identified and which serve as our surest guide as we grope forward through the fog of the future.

Let me conclude by summarising our basic approach to foreign policy. Recently there was speculation in the press about Singapore somehow pursuing a more "active" foreign policy and taking a "higher profile" in international affairs. This is simply wrong and a misreading of our foreign policy. Singapore does not have any ambition of playing a major role in international affairs. We know our strengths and our limitations. We do not seek a leadership role whether in ASEAN or any other international forum. We want only to live in peace and to secure a better life for our citizens. But we have always acted whenever our interests need to be protected. And we shall continue to do whatever is necessary to protect our national interests. We owe our people nothing less.

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