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SPEECH BY BG (RES) GEORGE YONG-BOON YEO, MINISTER FOR
INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND SECOND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN
AFFAIRS, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 50TH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE FALL OF SINGAPORE AT NATIONAL MUSEUM
ON 8 DECEMBER 1991 AT 10.30 AM

We are gathered here this morning to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the start of the Second World War in the Pacific. At 4 am on 8 Dec 41, 7 Dec on the other side of the Pacific, the first wave of aircraft from the Japanese Imperial Army in Indo-China bombed Singapore. Japanese troops landed at Singora, Pattani and Kota Bahru early that same morning, and moved quickly southwards. Penang fell on 16 Dec 41, Kuala Lumpur on 11 Jan 41. On 31 Jan 42, Japanese troops reached the Johore shore opposite Singapore and began an artillery bombardment of our island. The troops crossed the Straits on 7 Feb 42. On 15 Feb 42, the first day of the Chinese New Year, Percival surrendered unconditionally to Yamashita.

Then began a reign of terror, the **sook ching**, when thousands of Singaporeans were killed and many more tortured. Brutalized by the long war in China and seeing Singapore as the centre of the Nanyang Chinese resistance against Japan, the Imperial Army was determined to terrorize the local population into submission. The bitter memories of the Japanese occupation will long remain in the collective consciousness of all Singaporeans.

But our objective is not just to commemorate what happened a half century ago. It is also to learn from the past in order to better secure the future for ourselves and for our

children. There are two important lessons for us to remember.

The first lesson is the need to construct a structure of peace in the region which enables conflicts among nations to be settled in a peaceful manner without recourse to violence. The message must be driven home that violence does not pay, whether the aggressor was Japan in the Second World War, Vietnam in Cambodia or Iraq in Kuwait.

We need a structure of peace at two levels. On one level, we need an Asian-Pacific architecture which balances and brings together in peaceful co-operation the United States, Japan, China, Russia and India. Over the next 10 years, the existing equilibrium in the Asia-Pacific will come under great stress. The relative decline of the United States, the growing economic power of Japan, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the leadership transition in China mean that a new equilibrium must be established. We need political and economic institutions which keep disputes among the major powers within bounds. It was precisely the lack of such institutions which brought about the war in the Pacific. Imperial powers were then in furious contention. The United States retaliated against the Japanese invasion of China and the occupation of French Indo-China with an embargo on strategic materials, principally oil. The result was a war which led to the deaths of tens of millions in Asia. We have the opportunity now to build a different kind of co-prosperity sphere in the Asia-Pacific region. We must seize it.

But it is not enough just to have the big powers in balance. We also need a structure of peace in the immediate region around us. This is why ASEAN is so important to Singapore. Before the Japanese could invade Malaya, it had first to occupy Indo-China and then obtain the agreement of Thailand for the passage of its forces. Malaya fell before Singapore did. And it was from Singapore that Japanese forces invaded Sumatra and other parts of the Dutch East Indies. Thus, the security of Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia is indivisible; the security of Malaysia and Thailand is indivisible; and the security of

Thailand and Indo-China is also indivisible. The more we co-operate politically in ASEAN, the more our economies are integrated, the safer our future will be. United we stand, divided we fall. Divided, our own interests are likely to be traded off in the larger game played by the big powers.

In other words, to have peace in Singapore, we need peace in Southeast Asia and peace in the Asia-Pacific region. Singapore's foreign policy is therefore directed towards the creation of a structure of peace which balances the major powers and which facilitates political and economic co-operation in Southeast Asia and in the Asia-Pacific region.

But it is in the nature of man to be violent and we must never assume that there will never be war again. Peace is the result of the balance of power not its absence. Political power abhors a power vacuum. When that balance breaks down, as it does again and again in human history, we must be prepared. There is no guarantee that we will be able to find peaceful answers to the destabilization factors I mentioned earlier. Regional conflicts can break out again. When that happens, we can ask others for help but we must be able to look after ourselves.

This is the second lesson we should learn from the Second World War. Singapore was a bastion of the British Empire, its most important East of Suez, and grandly proclaimed to be so. Japan eyed Singapore for the same strategic reason. But when the chips were down, Britain's priorities were in Europe, not in Asia. London had no choice. Britain herself was under severe air attack from Nazi Germany. But this gave no consolation to those who bore the brunt of Japanese barbarity in Singapore.

On the larger chessboard of international politics, a minor piece like Singapore is never indispensable. While we should always make ourselves useful to others, we must never be under the illusion that we are indispensable to anyone. We must always be prepared to stand up for ourselves. This is what independence means and there is no greater expression of our

independence than the SAF. Hongkong is similar to Singapore in many ways, but on this point we are completely different. Hongkong is now a British colony and will revert to China as a Special Administrative Region in 1997. It does not need an army. We have the SAF. The price we pay for our independence is 6 per cent of our annual GDP and the effort of our entire citizenry in Total Defence, as national servicemen, as reservists and volunteers, as supporting wives and mothers. We need not be as helpless as we were fifty years ago.

The Japanese Diet had earlier indicated its wish to pass a resolution apologizing for the Pacific War but changed its mind a few days ago for lack of a parliamentary consensus. It is a pity. If we are asked to forgive, we should forgive, but we must never forget. We must never forget, not because we are unable to forgive fully, not because we still harbour bitterness in our hearts, but because those who ignore the lessons of history are condemned to become victims a second time. We remember in order that we do not have to forgive again.

The multi-media package on the Second World War, jointly produced by the National Computer Board, the National Museum and other organizations, will help us remember the painful events that took place. I thank Apple Singapore for its generous support.

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