

“Multilateral Cooperation and Managing the Global Commons”
STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
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THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, NEW
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1. Mr President, Excellencies, friends and colleagues.
2. Let me congratulate His Excellency Abdulla Shahid on assuming the Presidency of the 76th session of the General Assembly. I also thank His Excellency Volkan Bozkir, for his leadership of the 75th session during an unprecedented and difficult year.
3. The most important lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is that multilateral cooperation is essential to overcome the challenges of our global commons. Only coordinated international action can lead us to a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient recovery.
4. This is why the role of the United Nations is so crucial, especially for small and developing countries.

5. The UN must empower countries to deal with the challenges of managing our global commons in order to build a more resilient future.

6. I want to welcome and commend the leadership of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, not only over the past year but in putting forth a bold and visionary Common Agenda to reposition and adapt the United Nations for the future.

7. In particular, I welcome his proposal for a Summit of the Future to forge a new global consensus.

8. Today, I wish to highlight four key areas that require our urgent attention: public health, climate change, oceans, and the digital revolution.

9. First, the fight against COVID-19 is far from over.

10. Access to vaccines remains the biggest problem faced by many countries. Our immediate priority must be to redouble efforts to expand access to vaccines by scaling up production and distribution.

11. Singapore is a strong supporter of vaccine multilateralism. We will continue to support the COVAX Facility, and will donate our vaccines under the COVAX initiative to other countries with greater needs.

12. We have continued to help our friends and neighbours where we can, through other contributions of medical supplies, oxygen, and equipment.

13. As a transshipment hub, Singapore has always played our part to keep essential supplies moving to where they are needed most.

14. In the longer term, we need to take forward the recommendations of the G20 High Level Independent Panel to address major gaps in preparedness for future pandemics, strengthen multilateral support for the WHO and UN, and mobilise resources for our collective security – because no one is safe until everyone is safe.

15. This brings me to my second point: we need a sustained and ambitious global response to address climate change.

16. The effects of climate change are deeply felt at a local level, but the solution depends on a collective response at the global level.

17. For small island nations like Singapore, climate change remains a clear and present danger.

18. Recent extreme weather events are stark reminders that we do not have time to lose.

19. The IPCC's landmark report has concluded that global temperatures are likely to rise above 1.5 degrees Celsius in the next two decades, and we are likely to see more intense rainfall, flooding and droughts, loss of sea ice, and rising sea levels.

20. The fight against climate change will be a stark litmus test of our ability to manage the global commons through multilateral action.

21. No country acting alone can move the needle. But if we work together, we can make a substantial impact. If we fail, the consequences will be calamitous for every country and for all humanity.

22. Singapore has always been a strong advocate of the Paris Agreement from the beginning.

23. Last year, even while battling the pandemic, we submitted our enhanced 2030 Nationally Determined Contribution to the Paris Agreement and our Long-Term Low-Emissions Development Strategy for 2050 and beyond.

24. This year, we unveiled the Singapore Green Plan 2030, which outlines a whole-of-nation approach to sustainable development, and charts ambitious, concrete targets over the next 10 years. Among others, we will plant one million more

trees, quadruple solar energy deployments, and reduce waste sent to landfills.

25. We are also committed to working with partners in new areas such as green finance and clean energy solutions.

26. And we look forward to substantive outcomes at the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow.

27. The third global commons in urgent need of multilateral action are our oceans.

28. The oceans sustain our global ecosystem; they are a repository of biodiversity and a buffer for climate change. They are also a critical artery for trade, and a source of jobs and livelihood for billions of people.

29. As a tiny island state at the confluence of key global shipping routes, heavily dependent on maritime trade, Singapore is an ardent advocate for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea or UNCLOS.

30. UNCLOS is the foundation for rules-based governance of the oceans in all its aspects. It sets the rules for maritime entitlements and provides the overarching framework for the

peaceful resolution of maritime disputes. It is fundamental to maintaining open trade routes and sea lines of communication.

31. The 40th anniversary of the adoption of UNCLOS next year is an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to UNCLOS as the primary legal instrument for oceans governance, and do more to ensure its effective implementation.

32. Singapore also firmly believes in the importance of conserving and ensuring the sustainability of our marine environment. So we look forward to the fourth session of the BBNJ Intergovernmental Conference next year, and to the second UN Ocean Conference to be co-hosted by Kenya and Portugal next year.

33. The fourth area for urgent multilateral action relates to the digital revolution and its impact on sustainable development.

34. The digital revolution was well underway before COVID-19. But the pandemic has accelerated the pace and scale of this revolution.

35. Digital technologies have empowered millions of people. But the gulf of opportunities between digital haves and digital have-nots has also widened.

36. Today, 3.8 billion people remain digitally disconnected.

37. The digital divide has prevented access to education, health care, and many other essential services to millions of people around the world.

38. Digital transformation is not just about new technologies and new hardware.

39. Fundamentally, it is about improving lives and empowering people, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. It is about strengthening the resilience of our societies and economies.

40. In a nutshell, digital transformation should be about sustainable development.

41. To put it differently, if we do not close the digital divide, we will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. That is why digitalisation poses a global challenge that requires a concerted global response.

42. There are many questions related to digital transformation.

43. How can we provide fair and secure access to digital data, so that data is not monopolised by the few, leaving the vast majority digitally disenfranchised?

44. How can we encourage a freer flow of data across the world, to promote innovation and inclusive sustainable development?

45. Can we find ways to address the pandemic of misinformation, which has sometimes been arguably worse than the pandemic itself?

46. There are no ready answers. But we clearly need to have a conversation about a global framework to maximise the opportunities and deal with the challenges posed by digital transformation.

47. The goal is both simple and singular: how can we enhance multilateral cooperation to leverage digital technologies for sustainable development?

48. There are many paths we can take: the Secretary-General's proposal for a Global Digital Compact, or a new UN convention on digital transformation for sustainable development, or a framework of norms and principles. These options are part of the conversation that we need to have at the global level.

49. As a small country, a vital node in the international digital network, Singapore has always advocated a global architecture that is open, inclusive, inter-operable, and multi-stakeholder.

50. Such a global digital architecture must be shaped by a few guiding principles:

51. One, the voices of small states must be heard and our concerns taken into account.
52. Two, digital transformation needs to be people-focused, and improve people's daily lives.
53. Three, we need to involve all relevant stakeholders: the government, the private sector, civil society, because it is no longer possible in today's digital world to neatly draw lines between government, industry, and citizens.
54. Four, we have to "think digital", which means thinking in an integrated, multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral way. Complex problems require innovative solutions.
55. And five, we need concrete action, through identifying a common set of "digital development goals" and a framework for multilateral cooperation.
56. At the national level, Singapore is already building partnerships with many countries.
57. We have concluded Digital Economy Agreements with several partners.
58. We co-lead the WTO Joint Statement Initiative on e-commerce with Japan and Australia, which now includes more than 80 member economies and comprise 90% of global trade.

59. These can be building blocks in a larger global architecture.

60. At the broader level, we need determined action to close the digital divide, not only within nations but also between nations.

61. There is already much work being done. But we need to give these efforts a stronger push, through education, training, and, improving digital skills and literacy across the board; investing in infrastructure, for universal and affordable internet connectivity; and expanding access to data and digital public goods, including open-source software and digital utilities.

62. We can do much more to improve international data governance, to promote inter-operability, trust, and security when we transact in the digital environment.

63. I have only touched on some of the issues we need to look at. There are other important issues outlined in the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. The Common Agenda also lays out a way forward, on a global "digital technology track".

64. The next step is to take action on these proposals, and Singapore will support efforts by the UN to advance our global conversation. So that together, we can make tangible progress on digital transformation for sustainable development.

65. Mr President, Excellencies, friends and colleagues,

66. As we seek to build a more inclusive, sustainable future, we need to give each other a hand. This is especially so for small and developing countries.

67. In 1992, Singapore established the Forum of Small States, or FOSS, an informal platform for small states to discuss issues of mutual concern.

68. From a group of 16, FOSS has grown to 108 members today, and will celebrate our 30th anniversary next year.

69. To mark this milestone, Singapore will launch a new “FOSS for Good” programme.

70. It will commence in 2022 and will focus on priority areas such as digital transformation and COVID-19 recovery, tailored to the unique challenges faced by small countries.

71. Because we believe that it is only by working in partnership, helping each other, that we can all reach a more resilient, more inclusive, and more sustainable tomorrow.

72. It is always darkest before dawn. But dawn will arrive. There is hope and much work ahead for all of us. Thank you.

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