



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE  
UNITED NATIONS | NEW YORK

**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
73<sup>RD</sup> SESSION**

**GENERAL DEBATE**

**STATEMENT BY**

**HIS EXCELLENCY DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN  
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE**

**29 SEPTEMBER 2018**

*Please check against delivery*

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE  
DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN  
AT THE  
73<sup>rd</sup> SESSION OF THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
NEW YORK, 29 SEPTEMBER 2018**

Madam President  
Excellencies  
Distinguished delegates

1. I congratulate Her Excellency Maria Fernanda Espinosa of Ecuador on her election as President of the 73<sup>rd</sup> session of the General Assembly. I also thank His Excellency Miroslav Lajčák, the Foreign Minister of Slovakia, for his leadership of the 72<sup>nd</sup> session.

Madam President,

2. Multilateralism is at a crossroads. In recent years, we have witnessed a crisis of confidence in the concept of multilateralism and its institutions. Whether in trade, security or dispute resolution, questions have arisen about whether the multilateral system can continue to deliver effective solutions for our problems. As a small, open and trade-dependent state, Singapore has watched this recent retreat from multilateralism with grave concern. This is why I want to mount a defence of multilateralism today. There is perhaps no better forum for me to make this argument than here at the UN, the ultimate bastion of multilateralism.

3. It is easy to understand why there is a resurgence in isolationist, protectionist and xenophobic sentiments in the political arena all over the world. We are living in volatile, uncertain and disruptive times. The digital revolution is increasingly disrupting the way we live, work, play, communicate and organise our societies. Non-state actors and transboundary threats such as terrorism, infectious pandemics and climate change remain a clear and present danger. Frontier issues such as artificial intelligence and cybercrime have leapt from the pages of science fiction. Social cohesion is breaking down.

4. At the same time, the international order as we know it is also being disrupted. Since 1945, many countries and regions have benefitted from the open

and inclusive global order that was substantially underwritten by a single power - the United States. Today, we are transitioning into a multipolar world, where other powers are starting to assume a greater role in various spheres. This is a transition that has to be managed carefully.

### *Importance of Rules-Based Multilateral System*

5. I am not saying that multilateralism is perfect. In fact, we need to recognise that it hasn't always fulfilled all its promises. And sometimes, it has been over-sold as a panacea. How then do we make multilateralism work in this shifting geostrategic context?

6. My take is that every state has to make room to accommodate new realities and find a new modus vivendi. Foreign policy and trade policy always begin at home. Politics is always local. The global order will need to evolve and our roles and responsibilities will need to be rebalanced. In this perilous period of transition, we cannot and should not abandon the rules-based world order that has brought about unprecedented peace and prosperity for 70 years.

7. In fact, the scale and transboundary nature of the challenges we face today demand more cohesion and cooperation. There is a strong case to be made for doubling down on multilateralism, rather than retreating from it. We need a clear framework of rules and norms to ensure predictability and stability in inter-state relations and commerce. Defining these rules through a multilateral process in which all States engage one another as equals, is necessary to build consensus and respect for the rule of law.

8. Compliance with the agreed rules by all states is not only essential for global stability and the governing of the global commons, but is especially important to small states such as Singapore. The principle that agreements will be respected and implemented is fundamental for our survival. Without the rule of law, "the strong do what they will, and the weak suffer what they must". Small states like Singapore will not survive in such a world. That is why Singapore has been a staunch defender of the UN, international law and the multilateral system.

9. Take trade for example. Globalisation has not benefitted everyone equally. Pockets of poverty and hunger continue to persist around the world. Our people are worried about jobs. Unfortunately, the conventional arguments in favour of free trade, economic integration, and cooperation between countries have gone out of fashion. Today, trade frictions between the US and China have raised the spectre of a trade war.

10. We cannot simply blame globalisation. Governments of the day have an obligation to consider long-term and sustainable solutions, instead of just raising trade barriers. For example, to truly address widening inequality and wage stagnation, we must address its root causes. In the midst of the digital revolution, we must ensure that our people have the right skills for new emerging jobs. It is futile to fight to protect obsolete technologies and yesterday's jobs. On the contrary, we must try to take advantage of the new opportunities of the global market to create the jobs of the future. It is thus our responsibility, as governments, to actively put in place policies to train, retool and reskill our citizens by investing in infrastructure, training and education. This is why Singapore is restructuring our education system. We are putting in serious money to enable our people to continuously upgrade and learn new skills through a programme we call SkillsFuture. Our focus is to restructure our economy – to identify and work with the private sector to transform jobs, enhance our competitiveness and elevate productivity. This is fundamentally an investment in our people to make sure that they are ready for the future.

11. Ultimately, no country benefits from trade conflicts and protectionism. The negative impacts will ripple through the global supply chain and undermine growth and prosperity in all countries. At a time of increasing inter-connectedness and inter-dependence, it is now more than ever that we need a multilateral approach and strong rules. Singapore will continue to be a strong supporter of the rules-based multilateral trading system. The critical importance of the World Trade Organisation cannot be over-emphasised, as the neutral arbiter of international trade disputes.

#### *Developing Rules and Norms to Govern Cyberspace*

12. Another area where we urgently need to promote the adoption and implementation of rules and norms is in cyberspace. To reap the full benefits of digital technologies, we must develop a trusted and open cyberspace underpinned by international law and well-defined norms of responsible State behaviour.

13. The International Telecommunications Union ranked Singapore as the country most committed to cybersecurity in its 2017 Global Cybersecurity Index. Yet, in July this year, one of Singapore's health databases was subject to an advanced persistent threat. This was a deliberate, targeted and sophisticated cyber-attack. This shows that no country is immune to cyber-attacks.

14. All states must work together to implement norms and rules prohibiting such attacks on critical infrastructure. As the only universal, inclusive, multilateral forum, States have always turned to the UN to develop the rules that govern the global commons. One example is the UN Convention on

the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides the global legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas.

15. Just as we supported the UNCLOS process, Singapore stands ready to contribute to the UN's work to develop and adopt norms and rules on cybersecurity. To this end, we support the reconvening of the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) and the continuation of its work in developing the norms of state behaviour in cyberspace.

16. Cybersecurity has been a priority under Singapore's chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). At the 3<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Conference on Cybersecurity in Singapore last week, ASEAN agreed to subscribe in-principle to the 11 norms in the UN GGE's 2015 Report.

17. Singapore is also committed to capacity building which is essential for States to effectively implement rules and norms of state behaviour. Singapore will launch an ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence in 2019. We have also partnered with the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) on a UN-Singapore Cyber Programme to raise awareness and build capacity in our region.

*Regional Cooperation in support of multilateralism: ASEAN*

18. Our work in ASEAN is rooted in our belief that regional organisations can demonstrate how multilateralism can continue to be relevant and beneficial to all our peoples.

19. As the ASEAN Chair this year, Singapore will continue to work with ASEAN Member States and our external partners to ensure that the regional architecture remains open, inclusive and rules-based.

20. We are working with our partners to conclude the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). When concluded, the RCEP will be the world's largest trading bloc, covering a third of the world's GDP. But this is not just about big trade figures. It will send a powerful message that ASEAN Member States and our partners are committed to free trade, regional integration and international cooperation.

21. ASEAN Member States are also working together to leverage the digital revolution for our peoples' benefit. We established the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) at the 32<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN Summit in April. The ASCN focuses on ensuring interoperability and integration of services, and allows cities in the region to share experiences, exchange solutions and lessons learnt. We have

just concluded an ASEAN Agreement on streamlining e-commerce regulations so that businesses can market and sell their products easily within ASEAN.

22. ASEAN Member States are also committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes through multilateral processes. The situation in Rakhine State in Myanmar is a grave concern. The crisis is complex and deep-rooted and will not be resolved overnight. There are accounts of brutal and shocking atrocities. We condemn all human rights violations. We expect the Independent Commission of Enquiry established by the Government of Myanmar to carry out impartial investigations expeditiously and hold those responsible fully accountable. The voluntary return of displaced persons to Myanmar in a safe, secure and dignified way should commence without undue delay. Ultimately, a political solution needs to be found, involving reconciliation, fairness, justice, and better prospects for all communities. Only then can there be a durable solution to this complex inter-communal problem.

*Singapore's contributions to support the UN and multilateralism*

23. We have all been watching developments on the Korean Peninsula with concern. This year, Singapore was able to make a small contribution towards easing tensions when we hosted the Summit between the US and DPRK leaders in June. The Summit, as well as the three inter-Korean dialogues held this year, are important steps towards lasting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Singapore hopes that dialogue and efforts towards peace will continue.

24. Let me conclude by saying that there is no doubt that multilateralism needs to be defended and the UN strengthened to deal with complex global challenges. As members of the UN, we each have a responsibility to work together, to improve and adapt the multilateral system we have built painstakingly over the last seven decades. We owe it to our people to find solutions and to build consensus, so that our people can lead better lives. Ultimately, a rules-based multilateral system is indispensable to secure peace and prosperity for our people and our planet.