



MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SINGAPORE

**NATIONAL STATEMENT BY MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN TO THE 78TH SESSION OF THE UNITED
NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, NEW YORK
22 SEPTEMBER 2023**

Building a Future-Proof United Nations and Multilateral System

Mr President

1 I congratulate His Excellency Dennis Francis on assuming the Presidency of the 78th session of the General Assembly. We are delighted that a fellow member of the Forum of Small States (FOSS) has been elected to the highest office in the General Assembly. I also thank His Excellency Csaba Kőrösi for his adept stewardship of the 77th session during a very challenging year.

2 Our world is a troubled place. The COVID-19 pandemic was a global test of equity, of governance, and of preparedness. But quite frankly, our world came up short. We are still dealing with its sequelae – in healthcare and education, and the long-term impact on our world economy and on global solidarity.

3 The recent natural disasters in fact underline our common vulnerability as nations on the same planet. Nature is a force that does not respect borders. Our hearts go out to the victims of the earthquakes in Morocco and Turkey, and the floods in Libya. There are looming food and water

crises. And if we miss our climate change targets, we will heap even more misery upon ourselves and on future generations.

4 Beyond the devastation caused by pandemics and natural disasters, we have created purely man-made tragedies as well. The Russia-Ukraine conflict continues to rage on. It is a full-frontal assault on the UN Charter and a flagrant violation of international law. Global food security has been aggravated by the war in Ukraine as well as by climate change, which will add to inflationary pressures everywhere. In ASEAN, in my part of the world, the violent coup in Myanmar has deprived the people of Myanmar of the peace and development that they so richly need and deserve. Our hearts go out to our brothers and sisters in Myanmar.

5 This perfect storm is aggravated by political dysfunction almost everywhere – fractious hyper polarised domestic politics, the disillusionment with globalisation and multilateralism, and the lack of strategic trust between countries, and if I may add, especially between the superpowers. This dysfunction hobbles our ability to deal with the planetary crises that go beyond the ability of any single superpower or even blocs of countries to overcome. In fact, all countries need to work together to build coherent and realistic multilateral solutions.

6 Singapore is a tiny, vulnerable, open island city state, and therefore we have to strongly support the United Nations and the indispensable rules-based multilateral system. It provides a stable framework for us to thrive, to exercise our autonomy, and to chart our own future for our own people.

7 I was glad to see the urgent focus on these issues during this year's High-Level Week. The SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) Summit shows that we have fallen behind our targets. The Climate Ambition Summit, the three High-Level Meetings on Health, and the preparatory meeting for the Summit of the Future help us to re-calibrate the multilateral system.

8 I wish to put forward three principles that should guide our collective efforts to make our multilateral system more resilient and ready for the future.

9 **First, we should reaffirm our commitment to building a multilateral system that reflects our enlightened long-term interests as a global community.** Unfortunately, the world today is marked by even sharper geopolitical rivalry. Free trade is in retreat, and supply chains are being fragmented. This unravels the gains that we have painstakingly made over many decades by competing and contributing to a common global technology stack.

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10 We must avoid turning competition into a zero-sum game. Whether we are addressing climate change, outer space, or technology standards, it is important for all countries to balance our national interests with the collective long-term interests of our global community.

11 This means that Member States need to work constructively and in good faith within the multilateral framework, keeping our enlightened common interests in mind. The need for compromise and mutual understanding is a feature; it is not a bug of the multilateral system. In the face of the planetary challenges that we face, there is no winner who can take it all.

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12 **Second, UN Member States should accept and respect the diversity of experiences, systems, concepts and ideas within the multilateral system. This is borne out of our rich tapestry of cultures, religions and social norms.** We must recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all template for how a country should organise itself. No one has a monopoly on culture or wisdom, and we should resist the arrogant temptation to remake others in our own image.

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13 The rich diversity of peoples and nations everywhere, in fact, can lead to fertile cross-fertilisation of ideas, and development of even more policy options to deal with the many challenges that we face.

14 The UN is an indispensable platform for countries to share our experiences in areas from sustainable development to human rights, and where we can learn from one another. The Summit of the Future gives us an opportunity to strengthen the multilateral system by taking into account diverse points of view and building a common framework for our future.

15 The third point I want to make is that in the midst of the digital revolution and especially the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), we must prepare for both the risks, and also distribute the benefits of these technologies more fairly. In the past year, generative AI – ChatGPT – has captured popular imagination. Actually, we are already on the verge of the next stage – AI agents with the ability to negotiate and transact with each other and with humans. Often, you would not be able to tell the difference. This has profound implications on all our societies, on our politics, and our economies everywhere. Autonomous weapon systems without human fingers on the trigger are already with us – witness the wars around us.

16 As Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said at the opening of the General Assembly this week, “generative AI holds much promise, but it may also lead us across a Rubicon and into more danger than we can control”. This is especially so in the theatre of war and peace.

17 AI will fundamentally disrupt our assumptions on military doctrines and strategic deterrence. For example, the speed at which AI-enabled weapons systems can be almost instantaneously deployed and triggered will dramatically reduce decision times for our leaders. There will be many occasions when humans may not even be in the firing loop, but we will be on the firing line. This would inevitably heighten the risk of unintended conflicts, or the escalation of conflicts.

18 During the Cold War, the sense of “mutually assured destruction” imposed mutual restraint – although we now know, in fact, there were several close shaves. This spectre of nuclear escalation has not disappeared. Yet, the advent of Artificial Intelligence in conflict situations has actually increased the risks exponentially. So, we must start an inclusive global dialogue and we must start it at the United Nations. We need to urgently consider oversight of such systems and the necessary precautions to avoid miscalculations.

19 In fact, this is just one facet of many as we focus our minds on how to harness the potential and to manage the risks of AI. Singapore welcomes the Secretary-General’s decision to convene a High-Level Advisory Body on AI to explore these critical issues.

20 Singapore is optimistic that the UN and the multilateral system will be up to the task of establishing norms on these fast-emerging critical

technologies. The UN Open-Ended Working Group on ICT Security, which happens to be chaired by Singapore, has made steady progress and this offers some useful lessons for other areas, including AI. Singapore commits to continue to support all efforts to promote international cooperation and to strengthen global rules, norms and principles in the digital domain. We also look forward to the adoption of the Global Digital Compact at the Summit of the Future in 2024.

21 The reality is that many nations are not ready for the wave of digital transformation sweeping our world. We should not forget that even today, more than two billion people still have no internet access, and we need to work far harder to bridge that digital divide. As a tiny city state, Singapore is committed to supporting other small states by raising awareness, sharing experiences and building human capacity everywhere. In 2022, Singapore launched Digital FOSS, a platform for members of the Forum of Small States to learn from and to mutually support each other in the area of digital technologies. There is no doubt that these technologies are a powerful accelerator for sustainable development in developing countries, and all the more so in small states like us. But many developing countries and small states will need help to deploy and to harness the benefits of these technologies.

Mr President,

22 As the most inclusive and universal body in the world, the United Nations has to be at the centre of our collective efforts to address these global challenges. We *can* do so – as shown in fact by the recent adoption of the legally binding instrument on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. I am referring to the BBNJ Agreement (Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction).

23 Singapore is honoured that Ambassador Rena Lee served as the President of the BBNJ Intergovernmental Conference. She worked tirelessly and closely with all delegations to bring that ship safely to harbour. This week, I was proud to sign the BBNJ Agreement on behalf of Singapore, and Singapore intends to ratify this as soon as possible. We call on all UN Member States to sign and to ratify the BBNJ Agreement so that it can enter into force early, and I am glad that as of today, I believe 81 Member States have signed the BBNJ Agreement.

24 We need to bring this same constructive spirit to the other areas of the global commons, AI, cyber security, digital technology even outer space. We do not lack policy ideas on strengthening multilateralism, but we need commitment and action. The High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism has put forward six “transformational shifts”^[1] which will make the UN and the multilateral system future-ready. For many small states, our survival, our very success requires a strong United Nations and an effective multilateral system founded on the UN Charter and international law, and complied with by all states in the world. The Forum of Small States, chaired by Singapore, will continue to work with all states, large and small, to make the UN stronger and ready for the future.

Mr President,

25 The Summit of the Future next year will be a crucial milestone to re-position the United Nations and the multilateral system for our future. This Summit is also an opportunity to further accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. Singapore will work closely with all UN Member States and we will contribute constructively to this process. We call on all delegations everywhere to take a pragmatic and action-oriented approach towards the Summit. It is not too late for us to work together to build a better, safer and fairer world for all countries and especially for our future generations. Thank you very much.

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