

**Minister for Foreign Affairs
Dr Vivian Balakrishnan's National Statement
at the General Debate of the 79th Session
of the United Nations General Assembly
New York, 28 September 2024**

**MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN'S NATIONAL STATEMENT
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“Transforming the United Nations for Future Generations”

Mdm President, Your Excellencies

1 I bring you greetings from a tiny island city state in the heart of Southeast Asia, called Singapore. I think we must be one of the smallest who would now qualify as a member of the United Nations for the past 59 years. I would like to congratulate His Excellency Philemon Yang on assuming the Presidency of the 79th Session of the General Assembly, and I also commend His Excellency Dennis Francis for his stellar leadership during the 78th Session.

2 The world is in an acutely dangerous phase. Civilians in multiple trouble spots are paying a horrendous price. The risks of miscalculation and escalation have sharply increased, most notably in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Sudan. The loss of so many innocent lives is heart-breaking and the lack of trust amongst the major powers and the resulting deficit of global leadership makes it very difficult to find effective, peaceful solutions to all these ongoing conflicts.

3 We are approaching the 80th anniversary of the founding of the UN and we must double down on our commitment to a rules-based multilateral system. On almost every issue confronting the world – from peace and security to climate change, from the ocean to outer space, and from poverty to food insecurity, a reformed UN is absolutely essential for global solutions. The UN remains the only neutral and universal platform for dialogue and cooperation amongst all nations.

4 The **Summit of the Future** was a very significant milestone for the UN and our multilateral system. The adoption of the **Pact for the Future** offers the hope that nations can reach agreement given wise leadership and political will. The Pact begins the journey to transform our multilateral system and to maintain the salience of the UN. We must accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reinvigorate international cooperation, and transform global governance. That is why Singapore has always been a staunch supporter of the Summit of the Future. We stand ready to work with our friends to implement the Pact.

5 I would like to highlight three points.

6 **First, we must return to the basics – by reinforcing the foundational role of the UN in maintaining international peace and security. That is the raison d'être for the**

UN. We must restore respect for the rule of law and the UN Charter. This has underpinned global peace and security for the last 80 years.

7 We cannot allow recent violations of international law to become normalised. The ongoing war in Ukraine exemplifies a flagrant violation of international law and the UN Charter. The invasion of one country by another, under the pretext of historical errors and grievances, cannot be justified by any means. Article Two of the UN Charter is categorical: all members shall refrain from the threat or the use of force against territorial integrity of any state. It is also worth recalling that is why the preamble of the Security Council resolution 242 passed in 1967 also contains or refers to the “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war”. If we allow the notion that “might is right” to prevail, the world will become a very dangerous place, especially for small states. That is why Singapore and other small states have to consistently stand for compliance with, by all member states with international law and the UN Charter.

8 We as a small state, have no interest in taking sides or getting embroiled in great power rivalry. We do not want to become an arena for proxy wars. We simply aim to defend our sovereignty, to exercise our autonomy, and to chart our own futures – our people deserve that. This is why small states like Singapore have always been ardent advocates for international law and the UN Charter. For small states, multilateralism and international law is not an option; it is in fact an existential necessity.

9 Last week, Singapore in collaboration with the International Peace Institute (IPI), launched a report on small states and transforming global governance. The report, prepared by the IPI and the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore, highlights the priorities and the perspectives of small states. We hope that this report will catalyse further discussions on strengthening and transforming the UN and the multilateral system.

10 Excellencies, the work to strengthen international law and the existing international legal frameworks is an ongoing exercise. Singapore will continue to strongly support the work of the **International Court of Justice**, which is paramount for upholding the rule of law and protecting the interests of all countries, especially small states.

11 The **UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)** is absolutely crucial and especially for an island city state like Singapore, totally dependent on trade; in fact, our trade volume is three times our GDP. UNCLOS sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out. Freedom of navigation and overflight is a universal right. It is not merely an optional privilege granted by the grace of whoever claims the seas. UNCLOS also provides an essential foundation for coordinating our efforts on issues such as sea-level rise, plastic pollution, the loss of biodiversity, and ocean acidification. As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the entry into force of UNCLOS this year, we call on all countries that have not yet done so to ratify UNCLOS and to do so as soon as possible.

12 We also need to develop new instruments to strengthen international legal frameworks. The consensus adoption of the **BBNJ Agreement** in June last year was a crucial step in strengthening the UNCLOS framework concerning the conservation and the sustainable use of the oceans and its resources. I am pleased to announce that Singapore ratified the BBNJ Agreement earlier this week.

13 The UN plays a critical role in formulating new rules, norms and principles governing the global commons. For example, the UN has made good progress in establishing a framework for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, a process that we in Singapore have always supported.

14 Singapore also supports the Secretary-General's **New Agenda for Peace** and we stand ready to work with all UN members to strengthen the role of the UN in promoting peace and security, particularly in preventive diplomacy, mediation, and conflict prevention. Such efforts are urgently needed to save civilian lives and to prevent catastrophes.

15 Singapore remains a steadfast supporter of the UN's humanitarian efforts. We are gravely concerned with the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the sheer scale of human suffering. The Singapore Government, along with our NGOs and our citizens, have contributed more than S\$17 million in humanitarian aid and donations for Gaza, including through UNICEF and UNRWA. We have consistently emphasised the need for the safe and unhindered provision of humanitarian aid to all civilians in need. We reiterate our call for an immediate ceasefire, and for the immediate, unconditional, and safe release of all hostages. Singapore will continue to provide more support for the civilians in Gaza.

16 **Second, we must intensify efforts to support the implementation of the SDGs.** With less than six years remaining, we are still far from achieving the 2030 Agenda. To fulfil the promise of "leaving no one behind", we must support the poorest and most vulnerable countries and this is important because sustainable development provides the foundation for peace and security.

17 We need to accelerate our collective efforts in combating climate change. As a small island state, Singapore is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and especially sea-level rise. We welcome the high-level meeting held earlier this week on this issue. Although our share of global emissions is actually very small, we remain fully committed to peaking our emissions before 2030 and to achieving net-zero by 2050.

18 The **Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States, or SIDS4**, earlier this year marked a significant milestone for all SIDS. We welcome the adoption of the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS, which outlines an action plan for the next decade. Singapore will support our friends in SIDS. We launched a new technical assistance package at SIDS4, called “**SIDS of Change**”, which covers priority areas including blue carbon.

19 Singapore will continue to support our fellow small states, we will share our development experience. I am happy to announce that Singapore will renew our capacity-building programme for the Forum of Small States, or FOSS. We have labelled this programme “*FOSS for Good*”, a package that will offer digital-themed programmes, including “Leadership and Governance in the Age of Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence”.

20 **Third, we need to empower and transform the UN so that it is future-ready and capable of responding to the emerging global challenges.**To achieve this, several measures are necessary.

21 We must provide more opportunities for young people especially, to engage in the work of the UN and to serve as agents of change to revitalise international cooperation. We welcome the adoption of the **Declaration on Future Generations**, which underscores our collective commitment to building a world that serves the interests of future generations. After all, our young people have even more at stake.

22 Next, we must harness the power of digital technologies, in a safe and secure manner. The adoption of the **Global Digital Compact** is a significant step forward, offering a pathway to close the digital divide. The Compact contains an action-oriented set of commitments that can accelerate the implementation of the SDGs.

23 We are witnessing the dawn of the age of AI. By now, the promises and the perils of AI are well-known to all of us. We need to empower innovation in AI, whilst installing global guardrails to protect human safety, human dignity and values. Therefore, initiating a dialogue on the global governance of AI is imperative. Singapore welcomes the report of the **High-Level Advisory Body on AI**, and we commit to working with all UN members to further develop these recommendations.

24 Finally, we must transform global governance by making our institutions more representative, more responsive, and more effective, particularly for the sake of small states and developing countries. We need a more nimble multilateral system in which the international financial architecture and the UN work more synergistically.

25 Equally important is the need to reform the UN itself, to make it more efficient, effective and responsive. That includes reforming the UN Security Council in order to reflect the contemporary realities, through an expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent membership categories.

26 The effective functioning of the Security Council is at the heart of a robust and responsive UN. The five Permanent Members of the Security Council have a special responsibility that accompanies their privilege. And they must demonstrate leadership by cooperating to maintain international peace and security. The veto initiative has made the use of the veto more accountable by making the Permanent Members answerable to all of us in the General Assembly every time they cast a veto. This is a good first step, but it is not the end of that journey that is necessary. Much more work is needed to make the Security Council more transparent and accountable. Singapore will continue to work with other UN member states in this regard.

27 Mdm President, Excellencies, the world is traversing an acutely dangerous period of geopolitical tension. A descent into chaos and conflict is a clear and present threat. In this moment of uncertainty, all countries, big and small, have a responsibility to work together to preserve the peace and to save lives. We cannot achieve this without the UN playing its rightful role as an arena for dialogue and for partnership. This is the moment to double down on multilateralism and strengthen the role of the UN as a collective vehicle for peace and sustainable development.

28 Thank you, Excellencies.

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