



**PERMANENT MISSION OF SINGAPORE  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

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**STATEMENT**

**BY**

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## DIVERSITY IN UNITY

1 I congratulate His Excellency Mr Jean Ping, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cooperation and la *Francophonie* of the Gabonese Republic, on his election as the new President of the General Assembly. Singapore is delighted that for the third consecutive year, a fellow member of the Forum of Small States holds this high office. Mr President, you can count on our whole-hearted cooperation. I would also like to congratulate the Foreign Minister of Saint Lucia, His Excellency Mr Julian Hunte, for his able leadership during the 58th session of the General Assembly.

2 We meet in New York under conditions of high security. All over the world, governments, corporations and individuals are allocating vast amounts of resources to combat terrorism - for intelligence-gathering, surveillance, defensive and offensive measures. The Beslan massacre last month and the Jakarta bombing two weeks ago remind us once again that this war against terrorism is a long struggle requiring the mobilisation of entire communities from the top all the way down to the grassroots. Fighting it requires us to cooperate worldwide. It is also important for us to understand more deeply why terrorists are prepared to sacrifice their own lives to take the lives of others, including those of innocent children.

3 The human condition has not changed. There is in human beings a restless, competitive spirit that strives to get ahead, make discoveries and order or re-order the world according to our values and worldview. It is this spirit which drives us to achieve the 3 G's of gold, glory and God, a compulsion which can lead to great good or great evil.

4 The greatest evil is committed out of a sense of self-righteousness. This has been the case throughout history. Al Qaeda carries out its actions in the name of Islam which is a gross perversion. Religious wars are the most cruel because human beings are maimed and killed in the name of the divine. Ethnic and ideological conflicts sometimes turn genocidal when one side believes that right is completely on its side. Not a long time ago, the Khmer Rouge turned against fellow Cambodians with unbelievable ferocity in an absurd attempt to recreate human society. Ordinary people can be brutalized after long years of conflict, which was the case in Indo-China. More bombs were dropped on Laos alone than on all of Europe during the Second World War.

5 Untrammelled economic competition can also lead to grave injustice. Without rules, ruthless economic competition will return us to the jungle. Without the WTO, globalisation can become a means through which the strong dominate the weak around the world. In an earlier period, this resulted in entire continents being carved up by imperial powers.

6 Global organisations like the UN and the WTO give us hope that this century can be better than previous ones. We need rules which put limits on our competitiveness in the political and economic arenas. Like the Olympic Games, clear rules and the rigorous policing of the rules enable individuals to compete fiercely and triumph within a framework of sportsmanship and fairness. The rules are not there to dampen our competitive spirit, which is in the nature of man, but to channel it towards positive achievement.

7 The rules have to be determined by common consensus. Their legitimacy is derived from shared values which bind participants together. The rules have evolved over the years along with our collective sense of what is fair and proper. They cannot be imposed. If they are imposed, what we have will not be the Olympics but the gladiatorial pits of the Roman Colosseum.

8 At the most fundamental level, discussions and debates in the UN and the WTO are really about the values which bind us together as human beings.

9 As the world grows smaller, our sense of inter-dependence grows. As we interact more, we discover that we are more similar than we think. So many problems like global warming, epidemics and terrorism can only be overcome if we work together. So many opportunities made possible by new scientific discoveries can only be fully exploited if we combine our efforts.

10 Yes, we have become closer. We celebrated together when for the first time the entire human genome was mapped a few years ago. We grieved as one when September 11 happened. The slaughter of children at Beslan outraged us all. But will we ever become the same? That is not possible. It is neither in our biological nature nor in the nature of the historical process for human societies to converge and become identical. Even the same society changes over time in response to changing conditions.

11 There is in each and everyone of us a deep desire to be free, to experiment and to do better than others around us. Like all forms of energy, human energy must be channelled so that it is constructive and not destructive. This is the challenge of governance at all levels, from the village to global institutions. With the world becoming a village because of the ease of travel and instant communication, the design of global institutions is very important. They help us solve problems which each of us cannot solve by himself and set limits on unacceptable behaviour.

12 The problem of Palestine, for example, cannot be solved without the participation of the larger global community. All of us are aware of the rights and wrongs, and sometimes particular issues are right or wrong depending on the perspective we take. However, we should never lose hope. We should always look for new and creative ways to break old deadlocks. After all, it was only a few years ago that the prospects for peace seemed so much brighter. I remember as Singapore's Trade Minister meeting the Israeli Trade Minister at Davos in the year 2000. He said that he would like to visit me in Singapore with his Palestinian counterpart and, together with me, take a boat to the Singapore industrial park on a nearby Indonesian island where he hoped we could all be received by the Indonesian Trade Minister. I worked on this project of understanding and goodwill with my Indonesian counterpart immediately. Unfortunately, within half a year, the Intifada started and the cycle of violence got steadily worse, with each side blaming the other. However, we must not give up. With goodwill and statesmanship on both sides, and the support of the international community, it is possible to re-establish trust and start again.

13 The international community should also not allow the deteriorating relationship across the Taiwan Straits to get out of control. The push towards independence by certain groups in Taiwan is most dangerous because it will lead to war with mainland China and drag in other countries. At stake is the stability of the entire Asia-Pacific region. The relationship between the Mainland and Taiwan was much better in the not-too-distant past. In 1991, APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation), which is a grouping of economies around the Pacific Ocean, admitted China, Taiwan and Hong Kong based on certain agreed principles. In 1992, I remember chatting with the Trade Ministers from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong over an informal lunch in Bangkok. Later in 1993, representatives from China and Taiwan met in Singapore for informal talks with both sides acknowledging 'One China, to each its own interpretation'. All problems seemed soluble then. But, in 1994, Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui

gave a shocking interview to a Japanese magazine describing himself as Moses leading his people out of Egypt. From then on, cross-straits relations went from bad to worse as pro-independence forces in Taiwan became increasingly adventurous. Like in the Middle East, the international community has a strong vested interest in supporting a peaceful resolution of cross-straits conflict, based on the 'One China' position adopted and settled by the United Nations in 1971.

14 Even when the UN has no legal authority to enforce its wishes, its views carry moral weight. This legitimacy of the UN is derived from its wide membership, its transparent processes and the active participation of member states. It is important that the Security Council, which has the power to pass resolutions binding on all UN member states, be reformed and enlarged to reflect the reality of the current international environment, not that of sixty years ago.

15 We need rules which enable us to make decisions and express our collective judgement of right and wrong. These rules must evolve according to our collective moral sense. If any party believes that it has a monopoly of truth or wisdom, that is the beginning of evil. While there is much we share in common as human beings wherever we live, there will never be a unanimity of views on all matters. Human society is changing all the time. New scientific discoveries throw up new challenges to which different societies must respond differently. On matters of religious belief, for example, no one should expect convergence. Our disagreements over issues like the death penalty, abortion, the nature of democracy, gay rights, animal rights and therapeutic cloning are in a sense inevitable and necessary.

16 What we need profoundly is a respect for plurality in the world, one that is built on a common substrate which defines us as civilized human beings in the 21st century. In the 19th century, slavery was abolished. In the 20th century, gender equality became the norm. In this century, we must add more layers to what we share in common. Upon this shared substrate, however, we must not only accept diversity, we should encourage it. Indeed, like biological diversity, it is essential for human progress that there should be cultural and political diversity in the world. Without diversity, our ability to respond to new challenges will be weakened.

17 For all their imperfections, the UN and the WTO represent this diversity in unity. The idea of subsidiarity in the European Union acknowledges the diverse origins of the European peoples. In my own region of Southeast Asia, ten countries with different histories, speaking different languages and practising different religions are also embarked on a similar journey of moving closer together while respecting each other's differences. At the WTO, however complicated and arduous the process of multilateral trade negotiations, this is still a more civilized method of resolving conflicts and harmonizing national differences than erecting protectionist walls and fighting trade wars.

18 Respecting plurality does not mean that we stop recognising strengths and weaknesses. That would be hypocrisy. Some cultural values are more suited to modern times than others. Some economic systems are more productive. Some political systems are better able to mobilize the creative energies of their people. We must be honest enough to recognise that others can be superior to us in this or that area, and that it is therefore in our interest to learn from them. But no one should force his views on others. We should never impose a particular political or economic system on societies with different histories and traditions. What we need instead is an environment which encourages mutual learning and healthy competition. For this, we need to respect one another.

19 Recognising the need for diversity, the UN's Millennium Development Goals make no policy prescriptions on how countries should achieve those goals. Each country is free to choose its own path to the future. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenge of human development.

20 When Singapore became independent in 1965, there was no ready solution which fitted us. We had to seek our own way forward. Many countries helped us with aid and advice for which we remain grateful to them. The UNDP provided valuable assistance. With no natural resources, we had to organise ourselves in a practical way, add value and be of service to others. Little by little, we worked out pragmatic solutions to specific problems like job creation, ethnic differences, social security, education, housing and healthcare. Good governance was a precondition to all our efforts. We were tough on corruption and crime. When we saw attempts by international drug dealers to target young Singaporeans in the 1970s, we passed draconian laws. We were criticized for some of our actions by the Western media but we persisted with the support of the majority of Singaporeans, always acting with their consent and in their

interest. Having now reached a reasonable standard of economic development, other developing countries have approached us for assistance. Of course we feel honoured to be asked. But we prefer them to see Singapore more as an experiment to be studied than a model to follow. Every country is different and each must customise its own solutions.

21 Small countries like Singapore need a stable external environment. We are ardent supporters of international organisations like the UN and the WTO because they give us a say, together with other countries, in global governance. A world in which countries big and small can resolve disputes according to commonly-agreed rules is infinitely preferable to one in which might is right.

22 Over four centuries ago, a wise man from the West' visited the East. The Italian Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, went to China with the goal to convert China to Catholicism. He had a deep respect for the civilization which he wanted to Christianize. Realizing that the only way to impress the Chinese was to interact with them on their own terms, he proceeded to study the Chinese language, master the Chinese classics and employ Chinese philosophical concepts in his discourses on Christianity. Instead of talking at them, he talked to them in conceptual terms they could relate to. The Lord's Prayer, for example, was rendered as if Jesus was preaching in a Chinese environment. Although Matteo Ricci did not succeed in converting the Chinese, he left behind a lasting legacy. When he died, the Chinese Emperor consented to his burial in China and his tomb, inscribed with his Chinese name of Li Ma Dou, is to be found today in the compound of the Party School of the Beijing Municipal Committee.

23 History is unending. We need wise men like Matteo Ricci from the West and the East, and from the South and the North, to help us prevent the clash of civilizations through debate and dialogue. Respecting diversity should never reduce us to cultural relativism as if all points of view are equally valid. We should never stop trying to influence one another, and here in the UN we are always trying to, but we must always be prepared to see the same issues from the perspectives of others. Here in the UN, we have an institution which can help us create this better world.