



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

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**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
60<sup>th</sup> SESSION**

**HIGH-LEVEL PLENARY MEETING**

**STATEMENT BY**

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## THE UNITED NATIONS AT SIXTY: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

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1 This is not the best of times for the UN. The organisation is under attack from many directions. But I take this as cause for comfort not despair. Tension between the interests of nations and the idea of international community is inherent in the very nature of the state system. Seldom in the 60 years of its existence has the UN been entirely free of crisis and controversy. Debate over the UN's role and future is a sign of its continued engagement with the issues of our day. A worse fate than controversy is indifference. We may complain about the UN. Yet we instinctively turn to the UN as we seek to organise life in an ever more interdependent world. As a matter of reflex, we look to the UN for help and comfort when confronted with urgent new challenges of terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, pandemic diseases and tsunamis, among others. By and large, the controversies are over the extent to which and how best the UN should be involved. That it should be somehow involved is taken for granted. By so doing, we continually validate the ideals of the UN Charter.

2 The real problem is perhaps not that the UN is ignored, but that all too often we demand too much of the UN. It is not a panacea. The continuing validity of UN Charter principles does not absolve its members of national responsibilities in an international system in which the state is still the central actor and state interests the essential motor of international relations. The UN is only one diplomatic instrument in a repertoire. Whether this instrument or some other is deployed in any particular instance depends on what we regard as the most effective mode for advancing our interests. No state will ever leave its vital interests hostage to multilateralism. At the same time, it is a fact that only the UN has a global mandate and near-universal legitimacy. It is the only organisation equipped to facilitate cooperation between sovereign nation-states, especially where national interests need to be aligned with the interests of the international community. Herein lies the crux of the issue before us. UN Charter principles are, we all agree, vitally valid. But the Charter is not a sacred text laid down in tablets of stone for all time. Principles need to be operationalised to be relevant. UN reform is not something that should just seize us only on anniversaries. It would be a mistake, I think, to consider the 60th Anniversary, or any anniversary, a make or break occasion. Change and adaptation must be a continual part of the evolution of every living entity. Continuing debate, discussion, even heated argument, is a necessary part of this dynamic.

3 My delegation welcomes the opportunity to share our views on the Outcome Document that is before us. It contains many excellent ideas. But fruitful discussion on this wide-ranging Document needs some organising principle. It is worthwhile reminding ourselves that the key purpose of our gathering this year is to review the progress since the Millennium Summit adopted the Millennium Development Goals five years ago. Improvement in the lives of our peoples is the criterion by which history will judge us. It is from this perspective that I will offer my delegation's comments on three issues contained in the Outcome Document: management, human rights and peacebuilding. We consider them the core enabling issues because they structure the mechanisms through which we will succeed or fail in making the UN a more effective instrument to achieve social and economic development.

#### Management

4 Management reforms directly confront the interests of members against those of the organisation as a whole. They are difficult. But they cannot be avoided and are vital to restore public confidence and support without which no institution can function effectively. The demands on the UN are ever growing. Resources are finite. More effective use of available resources is therefore imperative if development and other goals are to be achieved. The draft Outcome Document has set out a comprehensive set of proposals. We welcome them as initiating a necessary discussion whose outcome I would not at this stage want to prejudge. I do, however, draw attention to the suggestion for an independent oversight advisory committee to assist the General Assembly and for an evaluation of the UN's entire internal control and oversight system as having special urgency under current circumstances.

#### Human Rights

5 The empowerment of our peoples with economic, social as well as political and civil rights must be both the end and the means of development. My delegation has an open mind on the proposal to transform the Commission on Human Rights into a Human Rights Council. But are the essential problems really only structural? The fact of the matter is that all but a handful of what are asserted to be rights are still essentially contested concepts. Is the basic function of the UN to enforce agreed norms or to expand the consensus on what constitutes agreed norms? The answer of course must be both. But the penchant of some states to present their views as universal norms inevitably provokes resistance, unnecessarily politicises the process and is ultimately unhelpful to the cause of human rights. Unless this deeper issue is squarely addressed, any change will be only superficial.

## Peacebuilding

6 Stability and the ability to govern are fundamental prerequisites for development. Bitter experience has shown that instability in one state can have a powerful contagion effect far beyond its borders, stymying development prospects for many. The manner in which internal developments in one state have wider ramifications is only one illustration of how narrow notions of sovereignty no longer hold. The proposed Peacebuilding Commission is an idea worthy of support. But given the complexities and sensitivities inherent in its proposed functions, we should be prepared to take a flexible approach and envisage changes in structure and function over time and in different circumstances. In so doing, we must acknowledge that the concept of absolute sovereignty - always more an ideal than a reality - will not always be a viable operating principle. For this reason, if for no other, a Peacebuilding Commission will be a contentious enterprise but the difficulties should not deter us from a worthy goal.

## Security Council Expansion

7 In the run-up to the 60th Anniversary Summit, expansion of the Security Council has dominated discussions on UN reform. This is to be expected as the Security Council lies at the heart of the UN system. Because the stakes are huge, the positions taken by various countries have become sharply polarised. Whether a vote is taken on any particular resolution or not, the issue has become very divisive. Singapore continues to believe that there should be an expansion of the Security Council to better reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. However, we are of the view that new permanent members should not have the veto because this will make it even more difficult for the Security Council to be an instrument of world peace.

## Moving On

8 We should continue to explore compromises on the reform of the Security Council and other issues that are before us. We should not, because of our inability to make progress on any particular issue, lose interest in the other issues that are no less important. Reform is a process not an event. Where there is consensus, let us take big strides. Where the issues are still contentious, let us be prepared to take smaller steps.

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