



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

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**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
63RD SESSION**

GENERAL DEBATE

STATEMENT BY

**HIS EXCELLENCY MR GEORGE YEO
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE**

29 SEPTEMBER 2008

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ADJUSTING TO A NEW MULTIPOLAR REALITY

President of the General Assembly,
Secretary General of the UN,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Emerging Multipolarity

1 The collapse of the recent Doha trade talks was deeply troubling. The Doha Development Agenda was the first round of talks to be launched after the end of the Cold War. After a failed start at Seattle, it was launched two years later two months after September 11 when member countries of the WTO felt a strong sense of common cause. But, since then, progress has been painfully difficult. I remember WTO Director General Pascal Lamy telling me that not enough countries felt a sense of responsibility for the global trading system. The recent setback in Geneva means that it would be some time before the round can be concluded.

2 During the Cold War, the US and the EU effectively led the global trading system of the non-Communist world. In 1994, the Uruguay Round was finally concluded after American and European negotiators struck a bargain at Blair House, much to the unhappiness of many countries which felt excluded but which went along nonetheless.

3 For the Doha Development Agenda, however, a number of developing country members were determined that this should not happen again. Brazil played a leading role in forming a G-20 coalition of countries including India and China. At the Cancun talks in September 2003, the G-20 became a grouping whose position could not be ignored, altering the traditional dynamics of multilateral trade negotiations. When the talks failed this July, it was apparently over the issues of agricultural safeguards for China and India but, even if a compromise over safeguards was possible, US cotton subsidies which was next on the agenda would still have been a major sticking point.

4 The failure of the Geneva talks comes at a time when the global economy is rapidly slowing down. Many of us worry that this downturn will be severe because of the collapse of huge asset bubbles inflated over many years by loose monetary policies. Protectionist pressures will now build up in many countries. A rise in trade protectionism can reduce global welfare by many billions of dollars. Our collective efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals have become much harder.

5 Who takes responsibility for the global system? While on paper the WTO with 153 members makes decisions by consensus, the reality is that a small group of countries has to take the lead to keep the multilateral trading system moving in the right direction. On no major issue confronting the human family can decisions be taken without the major countries taking the lead. The challenge of climate change, for example, cannot be tackled without the major emitters coming to some broad agreement on the way forward. If the Doha round despite being a positive sum game is so difficult to conclude, it is hard to be optimistic that a UN agreement on climate change can be negotiated quickly without the exercise of strong leadership by the US, Europe, Russia, China, India, Japan and Brazil. If they could not, or would not, exercise such leadership for global trade, can we expect them to do so for climate change?

6 The emerging multipolar reality of the 21st century is a fact that we have to face squarely. International institutions like the UN can only function well when we accept this reality and work with it. As a small country, Singapore accepts that while every country, big or small, has one vote each, we do not all carry the same weight. Small countries need the UN and other international institutions to protect our interests and we therefore have every interest in making sure that these institutions are effective. They can only work well if the multipolar reality is taken into account. The Forum of Small States which is an informal grouping of more than half the UN's membership takes a realistic view of global politics because this is the only way to secure our own interests.

Precedents of Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia

7 Recent developments in the Balkans and Caucasus do not bode well for the future. After the crimes committed against the Kosovar people in the early 90's, many countries expressed sympathy and supported some form of autonomy for them. Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February this year, however, was greeted with a certain discomfort because of the precedent it set for other parts of the world. I remember ASEAN Foreign Ministers discussing Kosovo at our retreat in Singapore in February earlier this year. While we supported autonomy for the Kosovar people, we felt it premature to recognise Kosovo independence at that point in time. There was strong preference for the issue to be resolved by the UN.

8 Russia's recent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states is also unsettling. Some analysts see it as Russia's response to the western support of Kosovo independence. While the issue of Kosovo and the disputes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are different and should not be directly linked, we do have a common concern which is the role of the UN in conferring legitimacy to new states. For this century to be a peaceful one, it is crucial for all countries, big and small, to adhere to the UN Charter and the international rule of law.

9 In contrast to Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the relaxation of tensions across the Taiwan Straits in the last few months serves as a positive example of how intractable problems from the past can be creatively transcended with wisdom, goodwill and patience.

10 Sometimes impatience is its own worst enemy. After 90 years, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire has left some problems still unresolved in parts of its former domain. We cannot expect all the issues thrown up by the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union to be quickly overcome. What we know is that, without the UN setting acceptable norms of behaviour, there will be many more problems in the world and some of the problems we now face will become far worse. Universally-agreed human rights are important precisely because they underpin these norms of good behaviour.

Civilizing Influence of International Institutions

11 However, the realpolitik of big power rivalry cannot be wished away for that indeed has been the human condition for most of history. But we can confine that rivalry and, by a combination of pressures, prevent any power from pushing its claim excessively. In this, international institutions like the UN play a civilizing role. International institutions cannot stop big power rivalry but can channel it, and ensure that the common interests of the human family are not completely disregarded.

12 For this reason, the smaller countries have a strong vested interest in seeing international institutions strengthened. The reform of the UN taking into account the changes in the world since the end of the Second World War is an absolute necessity. So too the other Bretton Woods institutions. Either we reform them to forestall crises or we wait for crises to force change on us. For example, if the present global economic downturn is the "once-in-a-century event" Alan Greenspan talked about, then bringing China and India into the councils of the G8 and making the IMF and World Bank more representative of the global economy today become an urgent matter.

Partnership Between International and Regional Institutions

13 We can also make international institutions more effective by partnership with regional institutions. Every region has its own distinctive characteristics which must be taken into account.

14 When Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in May this year, there was for many precious days, a standoff between the Myanmar Government and the international community over the provision of assistance. Western warships bearing relief supplies were viewed with suspicion by a government that saw not the supplies but a military threat. It was absurd that such suspicions got in the way of soldiers helping cyclone victims in the Irrawaddy Delta.

15 ASEAN had to step in and build a bridge of trust between the Myanmar Government and the international community. A tripartite organisation involving the UN, ASEAN and the Myanmar Government worked effectively to overcome problems on the ground and ensured that international aid reached the furthest corners of the affected area. This prevented a second wave of deaths from hunger or disease. ASEAN on its own did not have the capabilities to help Myanmar in a major way. But ASEAN working together with the UN and other international agencies was able to make a huge difference. In the process, we in ASEAN also learnt a great deal about disaster management from agencies like OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) and WFP (World Food Programme).

16 With globalisation, there has been a mushrooming of regional institutions around the world. Some have come to play useful roles in fostering regional peace and development. The UN and other international institutions can multiply their effectiveness by working closely with such regional institutions. For example, ASEAN which has helped kept the peace in Southeast Asia for over 40 years has recently decided to strengthen its links to the World Bank and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Effective Government as an Indispensable Condition for Development

17 While international and regional institutions can provide a more conducive environment, the key to a country's development is its own good governance. Because every country has its own unique history, there is no universal model of development applicable to all countries. Every country must find its own road to the future.

18 At the closing of the Beijing Olympic Games, the President of the International Olympic Committee Mr Jacques Rogge described China's hosting as 'truly exceptional'. Indeed from beginning to end, the organisation was superb - from the spectacular opening ceremony to the hospitality extended to individual delegations. The facilities at the venues and the Olympic Village were magnificent. Indeed the whole of Beijing was bedecked for the Games and even the air itself was scrubbed clean. The enthusiasm of the volunteers was infectious.

19 Everyone was impressed and rightly so. This was a Chinese dream come true and the world doffed its hat to the achievement of the Chinese people. Thirty years ago, all this would have been inconceivable, even to the Chinese themselves. What has changed? It is good governance and the right policies in place which unleashed the natural talents of over a billion people. The Beijing Olympics was not the beginning or the end of a story but a milestone in the breathtaking journey of a nation.

20 India with a different history and political system is also making remarkable progress. Here again, the right policies introduced less than twenty years ago have made a profound difference.

21 Indeed across all of Asia, from the Bering Straits to the Gulf, an ancient continent is stirring again, encompassing more than half the world's population. Although highly diverse, the countries of Asia are being reconnected by a new east-west trade in a new age of globalisation. To be sure, not all are doing well. Among those that are, a recent report by the Commission on Growth and Development chaired by Nobel laureate Michael Spence identified 'effective government' as a critical factor. In a surprising departure from western conventional wisdom, the report did not see democracy as a necessary or a sufficient condition, at least not in the initial phase of economic take-off.

22 This is an important insight which can help the work of international and regional institutions in promoting national development. If we set as our objective the promotion of democracy, the reaction among many countries will be instinctively negative. But if we set as our objective the promotion of effective government, our task will be much easier. Let each country after having achieved a certain level of development then evolve the form of democracy best suited to its culture and history. President of the World Bank Robert Zoellick in a recent speech to the Institute of International Strategic Studies hit it on the head when he emphasized that 'the strategic center of gravity is to build legitimacy through good and effective governance'.

Keeping the Peace

23 For development to take place, there must be peace. Without continuing peace in Asia, we will not be able to realize the promise of this century. The thoughtful manner in which the US is managing its relationship with a rising China and India is of decisive importance. It is rare in history for new powers to emerge without conflict. China and India are becoming responsible stakeholders in the global system. That many of the sons and daughters of Chinese and Indian leaders choose to study in American universities gives us reason to be cautiously optimistic about the future of Asia.

24 We cannot stop rivalry among the big powers but we can limit the harm that rivalry does to smaller countries. In fact, smaller countries can turn the emerging multipolarity to advantage if we combine our strengths in regional and international institutions. Among these the most important is of course the UN.

25 We still need global leadership but it has to be by a new concert of big powers going beyond the US, Europe and Japan. It has to be a new kind of leadership exercised in a transparent way through both hard and soft power, and preferably through regional and international institutions. Writing about the Beijing Olympics in the Wall Street Journal, Tony Blair recently said: 'The truth is that nothing in the 21st century will work well without China's full engagement.' The same can be said of Russia, India and Brazil. While the US will long remain dominant, a more inclusive global arrangement will make this a better and safer world for all of us.

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