



SPEECH

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE HENG CHEE HOW AT THE 11TH SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE SHERPA MEETING ON 16 JAN 2023 AT 0830HRS

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

1. A very good morning to all of you. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Shangri-La Dialogue Sherpa Meeting 2023.
2. The last time I addressed the Sherpa Meeting was back in 2020, just before COVID-19 came into Singapore and the world. I think all of us are very glad, I am sure, to be able to meet again like this in such numbers. I would say that looking back at 2020, much has changed. While we hope that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, that has not really happened as different parts of the world are at different stages of trying to come out of COVID-19, but I think more countries will have a better grip on it and eventually – hopefully – we can move into a post-pandemic world. We are along the process, but even as we are making progress as individual countries, we can all agree that new geopolitical challenges have come to the fore. We are indeed living in turbulent times and facing heightened threats to peace and stability.

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3. This year's Sherpa Meeting plenary session topics speak to pertinent security trends which will concern all of us. These include maintaining the equilibrium in the Asia-Pacific, especially amidst China-US tensions, military modernisation and its impact on the region's strategic balance, nuclear threats and capabilities, and last but not least, defence cooperation frameworks for regional security. It is in this context that we should also pay attention to the importance of getting regional networks and regional cooperation in place, and working properly as part and parcel of and as a significant contribution to the overall world order, that we hope would be stable and serving the purposes of all.

4. I am optimistic that the discussions that you will have today and during the Sherpa Meeting will lay the groundwork for a very fruitful Shangri-La Dialogue to be held later this year.

5. So this morning, allow me to share some reflections on regionalism in a turbulent world. I hope that this can be useful to the meeting's discussion on how to sustain equilibrium.

Regionalism Has Brought Countries Together and Served Us Well

6. The concept of regionalism is, of course, not new and there are different ways of looking at it. One is to understand it as a socio-cultural construct that connects peoples across spaces so there is an affinity, which says that we can see ourselves instinctively as part of the region and therefore, there are things that we ought to be able to do in concert. Another way to see that set of connections would be to take an economic lens to it and to see it as an economic network of interdependent trading centres. Whatever the case, in many instances, regionalism manifests itself as regional organisations and you can see them as in the case of the EU (European Union), APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Fundamental to the concept of regionalism is the idea that people of a particular geography share and feel a common putative sense of affinity and affiliation.

7. One important form of regionalism in the pre-colonial era in Southeast Asia was the patchwork of maritime trade links that was built up and evolved within the region. They connected the region to other parts of Asia, to the Middle East and Europe. Through this network of connections flowed goods, technologies and cultural and religious influences both ways, between Southeast Asia and the other parts of the world. This fostered interconnectedness within the region

and beyond, bringing people closer together in very practical areas like trade but also more than that, in socio-cultural dimensions as well.

8. This bringing of peoples and their interests together - notwithstanding that it brought about more wealth, trade and relative open exchanges of ideas and culture - did not necessarily mean that it ensured peace. It did not. If you look at the history of pre-colonial Southeast Asia, I think there are also very clear periods of conflict and war. As you saw in the acts of the great regional powers of the time, Angkor, Ayutthaya, Funan and Majapahit, which were the kingdoms and empires of the region, they frequently disputed and fought over resources, cultural differences and control over maritime trade routes.

9. Fast forward a little bit and as we entered the era of Western colonial rule, as the powers from Europe came and established colonies, that artificially altered how Southeast Asia interacted with and related to itself. Basically, it was carved out and for most of that period, the constituent parts were politically and economically tied more tightly to their colonial metropolises in distant shores, depending on which colonial power they were colonies of. The geographical map remained the same, but the interactions changed.

10. Then you move forward to the Second World War, where the Japanese tried to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS), which was aimed at creating a self-sufficient bloc of Asian peoples and states for co-prosperity under Japanese rule. Fast forward and now we have entered the post-World War II period, and from the 1950s to the 1970s, we saw the establishment of other regional organisations post-war, and this time trying to get the different parts emerging out of the war to work more closely together. You see the establishments of organisations such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) which was set up to stem the tide of communism at that time, the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA), which was founded by Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand, and Maphilindo to promote cooperation among the countries of the Philippines, Malaya and Indonesia. As you can expect, the geopolitics of the time interacted with security and other challenges. The different countries acting in their own national interest and looking at the need to maintain stability within the region in order to facilitate what would be in their national interests, cooperated together, but not always successfully and sustainably.

11. The examples that I just mentioned were not long-lived - they were pulled apart in the Cold War setting and divided by differences. In 1967, while the Cold War and Vietnam War were still continuing apace, ASEAN was born with five countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore. By the turn of the century, the membership of ASEAN had grown from five to 10, and it had also set up various accompanying ASEAN-centred regional institutions such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

12. As I traced the history of the region, you can see that ASEAN had, over the past 50 years or so, brought the countries of Southeast Asia together in a formalised manner to cooperate together for mutual benefit and regional stability; as contribution to the conditions of progress for this region and beyond, was not of a very stable genealogy. It is for these reasons that I have devoted this first part of my speech to trace this and underscore the fact that effective regionalism, while not pre-ordained, is possible. I think a more relevant one is that there is much to be gained by all the stakeholders by putting in the effort and the will to make good effective regionalism work – not as an aim in itself necessarily, but seeing it as a very important piece that can benefit the participants of the region, contributing to the overall global order.

Challenges to Regionalism

13. We need to consider what might be the challenges we now face in the modern era as we continue to put in the effort and muster the will collectively to make regionalism a positive contribution. There are three areas that we should look out for carefully. First, things that are of normative sense of affinity and connection, whether here in Southeast Asia or the wider Asia-Pacific region, are increasingly buffeted by great power rivalry, protectionism and militarisation. The net result of all that is that the risk of conflict, or the risk of misunderstanding - rubbing each other the wrong way and leading to conflict - has increased.

14. Second, the international rules-based order is under stress. You cannot see a clearer example of that than the violation of the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of one state by another. Without regard or respect for international law, rules and norms, the survival and security, peace and progress of states, big and small, and the functioning of the regional organisations to which they belong, would certainly be undermined.

15. Third, you can see that countries are increasing their respective military spending. The world military expenditure crossed the US\$2 trillion mark for the first time in 2021. In the last decade, from 2011 to 2021, defence spending increased by 28.8% within Southeast Asia, and 55.5% within Asia. You can see the build-up, and I think there is a certain dynamic to that as well, as people look at the overall situation and at what each other is doing. Sometimes you can build a certain dynamic to it, and we are seeing the results of that. You can also imagine the impact of that on psychology, on options of what might be possible on the negative side if things go wrong. At the same time, we are also seeing a more congested region as powers shift their attention to Asia-Pacific, some as a consequence of their deliberate “Indo-Pacific strategies”. As we continue to welcome the participation of all parties who can contribute to upholding the freedom and openness of the region, we must at the same time guard against anything that would inadvertently raise the temperature through actions, intended or otherwise, that would then increase the risk of miscalculations and accidents that would then escalate things.

Regionalism Can Adapt to the Times

16. In the face of all these challenges, I think that our best option remains to improve and to adapt various mechanisms – global, multilateral, and certainly regionally – through effective regionalism to serve the needs of our time. And again, the needs of our time, in the context that we meet, would be how to preserve and enhance the sense of stability so that we can have peace and development which serves the needs of all our peoples.

17. To do this, I would like to offer here three suggestions for the delegates’ consideration. First, revitalising our collective commitment to build a cohesive region, within ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific, via the array of existing regional institutions. Building a cohesive region does not mean to say that there would not be differences. To achieve this objective and to produce the net gains for everyone, we will need states to exercise self-restraint and not allow disputes or competition to thoroughly divide us, but instead to be able to channel differences through the institutions to find peaceful solutions, and to establish areas of cooperation where these might be possible. Within ASEAN, it is imperative for members to consider the collective interest of the region even as each of us pursue our legitimate national interests.

18. Second, sub-regional groupings within Southeast Asia can be used to address more targeted issues that may not require the attention of all ASEAN countries. For instance, existing institutions will need to work together with complementary sub-regional groupings to tackle more specific issues. The Malacca Straits Patrol (MSP), for example, is an effective sub-regional grouping consisting of the littoral states of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Another example within the maritime domain is the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA) between Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Together, the sub-regional grouping conducts maritime and air patrols to address transnational crimes in the Sulu Sea. Such groupings allow for swift responses to sub-regional issues, but as they do so, they also benefit the wider region in the contribution to overall security.

19. Third, regional organisations and institutions must be prepared to adapt their internal mechanisms and to adjust to new external realities, and those changing realities would include that of increasing tensions prompted by powers beyond this region into the region. You can see actions by minilaterals such as the Quad and AUKUS and others as they pay more attention and express their interest through active deployments. As they do so, we must, as a region, take note of their presence and find ways with this regional set-up to encourage them to take up a positive agenda as they conduct their work and pursue their objectives to also work constructively with regional countries. Such efforts, done well together, will go a long way in providing reassurance, preventing misunderstanding and then be able to positively contribute to the security of the region.

Conclusion

20. Ladies and gentlemen, in a tumultuous world, we will argue that amongst the many things that we must do, effective regionalism can be a bulwark and a stabilising force. The Asia-Pacific region will be a key focus of geopolitics. We must think ahead and work together to secure peace and stability for the good of all.

21. On this note, I wish everyone here a very fruitful set of deliberations. Thank you.

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