



MFA  
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# REFLECTIONS ON DIPLOMACY OF A SMALL STATE

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**SPEECH BY SENIOR MINISTER PROFESSOR S JAYAKUMAR AT THE S RAJARATNAM LECTURE AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON WEDNESDAY 19 MAY 2010**

**Introduction**

1        When I left the Law faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS) for politics in 1981, I thought that my journey into politics would be only a brief interlude before a welcomed return to academia. I did not foresee that I would take leave from the University for nearly 30 years nor did I expect that one day I would become Foreign Minister.

2        I have served in several portfolios, Home Affairs, Law, Foreign Affairs, National Security as well as a brief stint in Labour, all of which were exciting. However, my years in diplomacy were among the most memorable.

**How I got involved in diplomacy**

3        When I first got involved in diplomacy, Singapore was starting out from a very low base. Independence was thrust upon us in 1965. We had not planned for a diplomatic service and very few Singaporeans had any experience in international affairs.

4        The Government had to assemble a foreign affairs team from various sectors - President S R Nathan came from

the labour movement to serve as MFA's first Assistant Secretary, and our first High Commissioner to Malaysia Mr Ko Teck Kin came from the business sector. Both Tommy Koh and I were seconded from the NUS Faculty of Law to be Singapore's Permanent Representatives to the UN.

5 Tommy and I were colleagues at the Law faculty. One morning in 1968, he told me that he had received a phone call from Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam who wanted to see him. He asked me if I had any idea why, and wondered if it was because he had done or said something wrong for which he was about to get scolded! Later, it transpired that Rajaratnam had asked him to accept appointment as Singapore's Permanent Representative to the UN.

6 Towards the end of Tommy's first term as our Perm Rep in New York, he alerted me that the Government was considering me to succeed him.

7 In 1970, Rajaratnam discussed with me my appointment as Permanent Representative in New York, and said that then PM Lee Kuan Yew wanted to meet me.

8 I will not forget that meeting with PM Lee Kuan Yew to discuss my appointment, where Raja was also present. We were interrupted more than once by aides who passed

messages to PM Lee, which I later learnt had to do with some disagreements which had arisen between Singapore and the Malaysian and Johore authorities over the Water Agreements. PM Lee used that issue to illustrate our foreign policy challenges. Looking at me squarely in the eye he said: "You know, if they do not observe the Agreements it will be a very serious matter for us...it is a matter of life and death... You will have to bring it up at the UN Security Council and that will be your job."

9 My meetings with PM Lee and Raja on this and other issues had a huge impact on me. It drove home in a real way the interplay between national interests, international agreements and international law, and the challenges facing Singapore as a small state.

10 Now, that was in the 70's - forty years ago. We were a fledgling state with a mere \$5.8 billion GDP. Internally, there were serious difficulties - communal relations were fragile and we were still battling communists. Externally, we were coming to grips with an international system under the stress of the Cold War. The region was recovering from Confrontation and ASEAN had just been formed in 1967.

11 Given this unpromising backdrop, there was no guarantee that Singapore would be able to maintain its sovereignty and independence, much less achieve the

economic development and growth needed to become a viable independent country. However, we confounded the cynics and the skeptics by succeeding.

12 Our external landscape too has undergone dramatic transformation. MFA has grown and evolved along with the nature of our external challenges. In the 70s, MFA had only 15 overseas missions and about 50 career diplomats. Today MFA has over 400 FSOs, 46 Overseas Missions and 38 Non-resident Ambassadors, in all serving diplomatic relations with 175 countries.

13 One can say that I had therefore interludes with MFA and with the conduct of Singapore's diplomacy, first when I was Ambassador in MFA's early days and the next twenty years later in 1994 when I became Minister for Foreign Affairs.

14 Today, I shall offer some reflections on the nature of our diplomacy, based on these experiences.

### **Foreign policy challenges for a small state**

15 My first observation may seem trite, but it is an important point which we need to remind ourselves. Whether then the 70's, now or in the future, some things will never change. One is the fact that we are a very small city-state.

16 This is a fundamental geopolitical reality that frames our foreign policy. History is replete with stories of small nations which have come and gone. Independent city-states (e.g. in ancient Mesopotamia, Greece and Italy) flourished for a time only to be swallowed up by larger, more enduring empires.

17 One may be tempted to be complacent over the vulnerability of small states now that there are 130 small states<sup>1</sup> in the world, forming in fact the majority of the United Nations' (UN) membership. Nevertheless, world events continue to underscore the need for small states to be vigilant: both in maintaining the health of their national institutions and in ensuring that their interests are not overlooked or worse, being trampled over by other states and international organisations. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 reminded us of that.

18 A stable regional and international balance of power is vital for small states. However, the global status quo is seldom in stable equilibrium but constantly changing, sometimes abruptly. Small states are especially vulnerable when the external environment is thrown into flux, as it is now.

19 We have to take the world as it is, not how we would like it to be. The challenge for Singapore is to identify and secure a place for ourselves amidst the shifting dynamics and jostling for influence among the big players.

**Staying relevant; creating diplomatic and economic space with limited options and resources**

20 Since size matters in international relations, the challenge for small states like Singapore is to continually search for, and create, our political, economic and diplomatic relevance which will ensure our continued well-being and survival. To do that, we have to be that much more agile and nimble; indeed we have to be extraordinary. We must not only be a successful country, but we must stand out. Otherwise, no one would want to deal with us over larger and better-endowed countries.

21 It is a constant challenge for small states to be heard, let alone to ensure that our interests are taken into account. There is a saying that you are either at the table, or you are on the menu! Small states are seldom invited to the table, but we can work together to earn a place in the room.

22 I shall reflect on a few examples of how we have

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as populations of under 10 million

sought to maximise our manoeuvring space in the external arena to protect our own interests.

23 As a very young small state after independence, we naturally needed friends. Hence, we participated actively in multilateral groupings such as the Commonwealth and Non-Aligned Movement. Through these groupings, we began to learn about the regional and global issues of the day, their implications for Singapore and consequently, what Singapore should do to further our national interests. As we gained confidence and know-how, we started pioneering our own initiatives and pro-actively helped to create new multilateral fora and groupings.

24 One excellent example is our initiative in creating the Forum of Small States (FOSS) at the UN. In the late 1980s, then-PM Lee Kuan Yew felt that Singapore needed a friendly constituency within the UN that shared our concerns. PR Chew Tai Soo suggested rallying 'small states' with populations of less than 10 million to form an informal grouping – an idea that eventually materialised into the FOSS in 1992. Today, Singapore still leads the FOSS, which comprises 100 member states. Many of the meetings are held in the Singapore Mission in New York. The FOSS has developed into a useful forum for discussing issues of common concern from the perspectives of small states. FOSS is now so well known and regarded in the UN that



candidates running for key posts (e.g. UNSG) have requested our Perm Rep to convene FOSS meetings for them to canvass support. When Mr Ban Ki Moon was running for the post of UNSG, he and other aspirants for the job came to the Singapore Mission to talk to FOSS member states.

25 While on the topic of the UN, it is particularly important to cultivate personal relationships at the UN because many of the people sent there turn out to be leading figures later on. Let me relate a personal example. When I was Permanent Representative to the UN, I noticed a young, bright Egyptian delegate who seemed to be an influential operator in the General Assembly's Third Committee. I asked my Third Secretary who knew him to set up a lunch. That young man was Amre Moussa who later became Egypt's Foreign Minister and is now Secretary-General of the Arab League. We continued to meet in subsequent years and he still remembers that lunch.

26 Another good example is the active role that we played in ASEAN to entrench it at the core of the broader regional architecture. Recognising the need for a framework to manage differences in our diverse neighbourhood, we worked together with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand to establish ASEAN in 1967. ASEAN is important because it acts as an influence multiplier for the individual

countries within Southeast Asia on the global stage. Collectively, the Southeast Asian countries are given much more weight by the major powers than they would otherwise have on their own. ASEAN has established itself as a neutral platform for the major players in Asia to come together and achieve common understandings on key issues. ASEAN is in the driver's seat for forums like the ASEAN+3, the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asian Summit. This multiplier effect is also mirrored in economic logic. As a collective market of 580 million with a combined GDP of USD 1.2 trillion, an economically-integrated ASEAN is far more attractive than any one member state on its own.

27 Although we are one of the smallest countries in ASEAN, I think Singapore can fairly claim to have played a constructive role in the regional grouping. We have introduced initiatives such as ASEAN Retreats to enhance frank discussions. We have also promoted dialogue on strategic issues (*ARF* concept paper in 93, launched in 94). Singapore has also successfully proposed ideas for key forums to bridge Asia with other regions, namely, ASEM (linking to Europe), FEALAC (linking to Latin America) and AMED (linking to Middle East).

28 Let me not be misunderstood, that it is only Singapore which provided ideas for ASEAN. Other countries also contributed to Asean's development, for e.g:

- When ASEAN was formed, Indonesia was instrumental in bringing about the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation;
- ZOPFAN was a Malaysian proposal, which led to the establishment of SEANFWZ (Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone);
- The idea for an AFTA was first mooted by Thailand.

29 I should add a more recent example of our role in establishing the informal Global Governance Group or 3G. The rise of the G20 following the recent financial crisis has created an opportunity for emerging nations to play a more active role in shaping the global economic order and other global issues. To fully benefit from this development, we must find ways of ensuring the G20 does not become exclusive, but takes into account the views of other nations. Singapore and over 20 other like-minded small and medium states came together to create the 3G to foster a constructive dialogue on coordination and cooperation between G-20 and non G-20 members.

### **Expanding our economic space**

30 It is not possible today to draw a line between traditional diplomacy and advancing Singapore's economic interests in the external arena. Expanding our economic

space is a critical foreign policy imperative. In fact, Singapore's foreign policy is conducted off the bedrock of our continuing economic success. We cannot expect larger, more powerful countries to engage us and our leaders unless we have a long and consistent track record of good governance and effective economic management.

31 Our strategy on free trade agreements, or FTAs, is particularly instructive on how we enlarged our economic space by seizing opportunities to secure trade agreements with strategic partners. In the 1990s, as progress on the Uruguay Round slowed, the world economy looked in danger of coalescing into regional economic blocs. Although, as a first principle, our interests were best served by a successful rules based multilateral trading system (MTS), we could not stand idly by and wait for it to happen. We needed an "insurance policy" beyond the MTS. We thus became the first Southeast Asian country to propose FTAs with key partners such as Japan and the US.

32 I will not forget the making of the FTAs with Japan and the US, because they carry interesting accounts of the way our leaders and officials worked closely together and seized opportunities at the right moment.

**33 FTA with Japan (concluded 2002).** The Japanese foreign ministry (Gaimusho) had some reservations. They

were worried about appearing unsupportive of the multilateral trading process.

34 The breakthrough came during PM Goh's visit to Tokyo in Dec 1999, when he seized the initiative to win over Finance Minister Kiichi Miyazawa. At the same time that Chok Tong was meeting Miyazawa, Foreign Minister Yohei Kono and I were having our bilateral meeting at Gaimusho. Halfway during the meeting, an aide passed Kono a note whereupon he said he had to take a phonecall in his office. A few minutes later, Kono's aide asked me to join Kono in his office. I was puzzled and wondered what was going on. Imagine my surprise when I entered his office and Kono said "Your PM wants to speak to you". PM Goh came on line to say Miyazawa was supportive and had spoken to Kono and I should also persuade Kono, which I sought to do when our bilateral meeting resumed.

35 These events paved the way for Chok Tong and PM Obuchi to announce that both sides start a joint study group on the JSFTA.

**36 FTA with US (concluded 2003).** Similarly, the decision to launch the USSFTA came down to a flurry of fortuitous events and timely intervention. During the Gala dinner at the APEC Leaders Meeting in Brunei on 15 November 2000, US Trade Representative Charlene

Barshefsky, who was a strong supporter of the USSFTA, shared with us that there was no consensus yet within the administration to the USSFTA. She advised us that it would be premature for PM Goh to raise the matter with President Clinton.

37 I told her there was a great opportunity for PM Goh and Clinton to discuss it informally during their night golf game after the dinner. Charlene was surprised as she did not know about the golf game. She agreed that not raising the USSFTA would be a wasted opportunity, but still hesitated. After consulting with her officials seated at other tables, she told us there was still no consensus.

38 The leaders were about to finish dinner and were getting ready to leave. I was thinking to myself that a great chance was slipping through our fingers. I quickly called Minister (T&I) George Yeo from another table to join my discussions and push our case to her. She had another huddle with her officials and this time, she agreed PM Goh could raise the topic with Clinton. George and I managed to catch PM Goh just in time before he went off for his midnight golf game.

39 The rest of the story on how the USSFTA was conceived during that golf game has been well told.

40 I recount these FTA episodes because they show how leaders and officials have to be alert to opportunities and seize the moment. Where there is resistance or inertia on the part of officials of other countries, a top down political approach involving Ministers and even Prime Ministers and Presidents can be instrumental to ensure a breakthrough and successful outcome.

41 The FTA episodes also illustrate the need for officers to constantly examine the validity of assumptions behind policies, in order to remain responsive and relevant. In a fast changing global environment, a policy that is sound today may not be so tomorrow. In pursuing our national interests, we should also not be afraid to be outliers. If we fail, at least we would have tried. If we succeed, we would be seen as pathfinders for others.

42 When we first embarked on our FTA strategy, we went against prevailing conventional thinking. We were also criticised by others for not being WTO-consistent and providing a back door entry for others into AFTA. We persevered and eventually signed FTAs with eleven countries including the world's major economies<sup>2</sup> as well as eight multilateral FTAs.<sup>3</sup> Many countries, including those who

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<sup>2</sup> Bilateral FTAs were concluded with China, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Jordan, India, Panama, Peru, the United States, and Costa Rica.

<sup>3</sup> Multilateral FTAs include: AFTA (with ASEAN countries), ASEAN-China FTA, ASEAN-Japan FTA, ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA, ASEAN- Korea FTA, the Gulf Cooperation Council-Singapore FTA

criticised us, have since followed in our footsteps.

43 Our national experience with FTAs was also infused into the ASEAN experience. Today, ASEAN has FTAs with many of its dialogue partners, further extending the economic reach of individual member states.

### **International law and international agreements: a means to safeguard our space**

44 For a small country, observance of international law is critical to safeguarding our sovereignty, independence and other interests. For instance, the principles of the UN Charter on non-resort to force; peaceful settlement of disputes; non-interference in a country's internal affairs, provide the international framework for small states like Singapore to co-exist and have a voice alongside larger, more powerful states. The observance of international law is an integral feature of this framework. Small states cannot survive and thrive in a world in which interaction among states is governed by relative power and not by law.

**45 UNCLOS.** We should therefore take an active role in forums concerned with the shaping of new international

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(with Gulf countries), the Singapore-European FTA (with Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Iceland) and the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (with Brunei, New Zealand and Chile).



norms, laws and regimes. Let me cite the example of our involvement in the UN Conference on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in the 1970s. We fought for more equitable management of the resources of the deep seabed area at the UN. The coastal states had grouped together to push for new rules of the law of the sea for endorsement of their claims to legalise the extended maritime jurisdictions they had unilaterally extended. This would have resulted in vast tracts of the high seas falling within national jurisdictions, compromising Singapore's interest in freedom of navigation. We galvanized landlocked and some like-minded coastal states to counter their attempt and formed a Caucus known as the Group of Landlocked and Geographically Disadvantaged States. I have written on this elsewhere and so shall not go into the details, except to say that that was the first time Singapore had proactively lobbied for a UN General Assembly resolution because we felt that our national interests were at stake.

**46 International agreements.** Integral to upholding international law is another important principle, namely the honouring of international agreements. Sometimes, we have been accused of being overly legalistic and rigid when we ask for the observance of treaties and agreements.

47 We should not be put off by such criticisms of being legalistic. It would be extremely difficult for a small country

to conduct relations with other countries on the basis of mutual trust and respect if the sanctity of international agreements is not recognised. This is why we insist that agreements entered into in good faith should be honoured. On our part, we should always seek to meet our obligations under agreements to which we have become parties.

**48 Domestic laws and punishments.** International law is also vital to maintaining our space to govern ourselves as we choose. Each country can determine its own policies and corpus of laws, subject of course to universally accepted rules concerning human rights. Our laws have been largely influenced by the system which we inherited from the British, but with adaptations to suit our own circumstances.

49 From time to time, we have to manage diplomatic fallouts when we apply our laws to foreign nationals who commit offences in Singapore. Issues arise when those countries have different legal norms and penalties. Sometimes a matter can be blown up or politicised due to political situations in other countries or sensationalised by their media, for instance the caning of American teenager Michael Fay for vandalism and the death sentence on Filipino maid Flor Contemplacion for murder. In both these cases, Singapore came under immense pressure to waive our laws.

50 We do not want to go out of our way to provoke

others or create problems, but when such incidents happen, we have to quietly stand our ground. If we had taken the easy way out to avoid bilateral fallout, then everyone would have known that our legal system has double standards; one for locals, another for foreigners. In the larger scheme of things, the integrity of our legal system and the standing of our Judiciary are among the hard earned assets of the Singapore brand name. We cannot afford to jettison them for transient political convenience. The law must take its course, but at the same time, it is important that bilateral relations are not derailed. This calls for patience and diplomacy on the part of both countries, as well as our Ambassadors on the ground being cool headed and unruffled by demonstrations and media frenzy.

### **Whole of Government Approach**

51 Globalisation has created an ever more complex operating environment for us. Even as we seek to expand our space, the very concepts of space and boundaries are being challenged. Issues that were previously considered domestic affairs are now on the international agenda, blurring the line between domestic and foreign policy.

52 We must recognise that foreign ministries can no longer be the sole point of contact for dealings with other

countries. From the earlier FTA examples, it should be clear that MFA has a role to play in promoting and enlarging Singapore's economic interests. MFA should also work with our economic agencies to identify business opportunities and help promote the interests of Singapore companies in new and emerging markets. MFA officers must therefore be familiar with our economic strategies and international economic developments, and be attuned to the needs of our business community. Only then will they be able to defend our economic interests and be quick to seize the right opportunities for Singapore.

53 At the same time, non-MFA agencies must also develop an understanding of how international developments can affect issues under their purview, and work closely with MFA to further our national interests. The conduct of Singapore's external affairs is not and cannot be the exclusive preserve of MFA as various ministries have to deal with the international dimensions of their respective portfolios.

54 Therefore, all agencies have to lend weight to our foreign policy, whether in FTAs, climate change negotiations, national security coordination or the hosting of large scale international conferences like APEC or IMF/World Bank. Without this combination of domestic domain expertise and diplomatic savvy, we would get stuck pursuing a defensive agenda abroad - constantly fighting to prevent others from

encroaching on our interests, but unable to push new initiatives and grow our international space.

55 Our agencies must work to function effectively as a seamless whole. We are just too small for fractious turf battles and inter agency rivalry. The "Whole-of-Government approach" has therefore become increasingly vital in dealing with these multi-faceted challenges to ensure Singapore's continued economic success and relevance on the international stage.

56 Let me share two examples of our WOG approach. The Pedra Branca case, which culminated in the ICJ decision to award PB to Singapore, spanned over 20 years of research and preparation. Given the historical, legal, territorial and maritime issues at play, the case required multiple expertise that could only come from many specialised agencies. It was thus crucial that AGC, MPA, NAS<sup>4</sup> and MFA were able to work together without letting their institutional interests get in the way.

57 The current issue of climate change is another example of how we had to harness specialised expertise from six ministries and various other agencies to formulate Singapore's domestic strategy on carbon mitigation as well as our national position in the international negotiations.

Because the impact of climate change policy cuts across numerous domains - from economic to transport to environmental and national development - in 2007, we set up an Inter-ministerial Committee on Climate Change, which I chair, that comprises MOT, MOF, MTI, MEWR, MND and MFA.

### **Concluding thoughts**

58 I began by reminding ourselves of the reality that we are a small country, and how this fact poses special challenges for foreign policy. Even if we forget sometimes, others remind us that we are a little red dot!

59 I hope I have shown that while size does matter, a small country is not necessarily doomed to be irrelevant. The global balance of power will always be set by the major powers, but small states are not powerless to affect it. Small states can do so by being internally robust so that major powers have no pretext to intervene and upset the existing balance. They can also seize opportunities that may arise from events they do not control. Small states can act in unison and thereby multiply their strengths and influence through groupings such as FOSS or 3G. The representatives of small states are often requested to play a bridge building role or as the impartial chairman in multilateral institutions or

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<sup>4</sup> National Archives

negotiations. By actively contributing ideas and working to forge alliances and friendships, we have played a useful role in helping to uphold and shape a regional and international system in which large and small countries generally abide by the same rules.

60 We have done reasonably well. What are some of the factors that have enabled us to do so?

- **Singapore is a success story** – not just economic growth but many other aspects – social progress, multiracial harmony, meritocracy, corruption free, law and order etc. If we were a failed country, no one would pay attention to us.
- **Quality of leadership at all levels.** This has earned us tremendous clout and respect. MM's stature and the respect he commands with world leaders has been a huge factor. Not just MM, but also PM, SM Goh and other Ministers. Other leaders seek out their analyses as well as advice especially about the region.
- **Quality of our officials,** Ambassadors, Perm Secs, Defence Chiefs, and Chiefs of our intelligence departments are also highly regarded, for e.g. Tommy Koh, Kishore Mahbubani, and Chan Heng Chee.

- **Whole of Government Approach.** This is something to which we did not pay so much attention in the earlier years, but we are now practising it.

61 The challenge for us is not to get lulled into complacency or take for granted that we can always stay relevant and create space. When people praise us for "punching above our weight", it is dangerous to allow such seductive praise to get to our heads.

62 Ultimately, our foreign policy will mirror the trajectory and profile of our domestic achievements, which in turn, will boil down to the quality and diligence of our people.

63 If we are to be taken seriously, we must continue to be successful in terms of maintaining broad based economic growth, as well as our uniqueness as a stable, multiracial society based on meritocracy, law and order.

64 In the end it all comes down to the quality of our people - From Ministers, to Perm secs, Ambassadors and other officials as well as leaders in the private sector, pulling together as one team.

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