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**Singapore Regional Business Forum 2015**

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road**

**Monday, 27 July 2015**

**Ritz Carlton Hotel, Singapore**

**Speaker:** Professor Tommy Koh, Chairman, Governing Board, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore.

**Topic:** The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road: A Singapore Perspective.

**Salutations**

1. Mr S S Teo, Chairman, SBF,  
Minister Fu Ying, Chairperson, Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress of China,  
  
Mr Wang Jinzhen, Vice-Chairman, China Council for the Promotion of International Trade,  
  
Pak Havas Oegroseno, Deputy Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs, of Indonesia,  
  
Judge Paik Jin-Hyun of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea,  
Ambassador Ong Keng Yong  
Your Excellencies  
Distinguished Speakers  
Ladies and Gentlemen

**Thank You**

2. I would like to join Mr S S Teo and the Singapore Business Federation in welcoming all of you, especially, our foreign friends to Singapore and to this important forum. I believe that this is the first occasion on which President Xi

Jinping's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road proposal, is being discussed outside China.

3. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Minister Fu Ying for accepting my invitation to join us at this forum. Minister Fu Ying is one of China's most accomplished diplomats. She won the hearts and minds of the peoples of Australia and the United Kingdom, when she served as China's Ambassador to those countries. She was China's Vice Foreign Minister in charge of Europe and, subsequently, Asia. She is currently the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Chinese National People's Congress.

### **My Three Points**

4. In accordance with my wife's advice, I will make three points. My first point is on the ancient maritime silk road and some lessons we can learn from it. My second point is to explain why I support the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road. My third point is to make some suggestions for China's consideration.

### **The Ancient Maritime Silk Road**

5. Historians, such as Professor Wang Gungwu and archaeologists, such as Professor John Miksic, have told us that trade and travel have taken place for thousands of years in the East China Sea, South China Sea, Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Arab, Persian, Indian, Ceylonese, Southeast Asian and Chinese seafarers and traders had been active in the ancient maritime silk road for at least two millennia.
6. I have benefitted greatly from reading Wang Gungwu's study of China's Nanhai Trade, covering the period of over 1,000 years, from the Han to the Tang dynasties. I have enjoyed reading John Miksic's book, Singapore and The Silk Road of The Sea: 1300 to 1800. I have also gained many new knowledge and insights from Anthony Reid's two books, Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce: 1450-1680. Another book which I highly recommend is

Sugata Bose's *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire*.

7. What all these books tell us is that, for thousands of years, the people of Southeast Asia had been trading among themselves and, with China, India, Ceylon, Arabia and Persia. What the world wanted from Southeast Asia were spices, the feathers of exotic birds, tortoise shell, pearl, ivory and rhino horns. What the world wanted from China were silk, ceramics and tea. From Arabia came frankincense, glass and horses. India exported textile, metal and precious stones. But, as Wang Gungwu has pointed out, the trade was not just of goods but also of ideas, cultures and religions.
8. Some famous travellers had written about their sea journey along the maritime silk road. Let me just mention two of them. The Venetian, Marco Polo had travelled to China, in 1271, during the Yuan Dynasty, by land. However, in 1292, he returned to Europe by sea, departing from the port of Quanzhou, in the Fujian province, and stopping at Sumatra, Ceylon, the Malabar coast of India before arriving in the Persian Gulf.
9. The great Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battuta, went on his haj to Mecca. However, instead of going home, he made a detour which lasted 23 years. In India, he found employment with the Sultan of Delhi. He was sent by the Sultan of Delhi, as one of his Ambassadors to China in 1342. He travelled to China from India and from China to his hometown of Tangier by sea. His route was similar to that of Marco Polo.
10. There are two lessons we should learn from the ancient maritime silk road. The first is the importance of the freedom of navigation. Without the freedom of navigation, shipping and maritime trade would not have prospered. The second lesson is the importance of multiculturalism. The participants of the ancient maritime silk road were people from different countries and of different races, religions, languages and cultures. They treated one another with mutual respect. For example, Arab traders were allowed to build mosques in

Quanzhou to practise their faith. This is the spirit of the ancient maritime silk road which we should adopt.

### **Reasons In Favour Of Proposal**

11.I support the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road proposal for the following reasons. The proposal will boost trade, shipping, tourism, the development of maritime infrastructure, enhance connectivity and promote better mutual understanding between and among the people. It will create many new economic opportunities and jobs. Another reason for supporting the proposal is that it complements the Master Plan on ASEAN connectivity. I hope China will link the two projects and make them mutually reinforcing. I also see synergy between President Xi's proposal and Indonesian President Jokowi's vision of developing Indonesia as a maritime power. With the creation of AIIB, funding for infrastructure projects of merit is assured.

12.While the primary focus is on developing hard infrastructure, we should also pay attention to the soft infrastructure. We should cooperate on the development of our human resource and the sharing of skills and expertise. We should encourage more people-to-people contacts and exchanges, especially among our young people. We should develop a culture of respecting diversity and promoting better inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road will only succeed if it is based upon the principle of mutual respect and mutual benefit. If disputes arise, they should be settled peacefully and in accordance with international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Rule of Law must prevail over the rule that might is right.

### **Some Suggestions For China's Consideration**

13.I would like to make a few suggestions for China's consideration. The first suggestion is that China should work harder to gain the understanding and trust of China's neighbours and partners. I observe that, at present, there is a deficit of trust between China, on the one hand, and Japan, Vietnam, the

Philippines and India, on the other. Because of this deficit of trust, there is unnecessary speculation about China's strategic objective in launching this initiative.

14. My second suggestion is that China should adopt an open and inclusive approach. All countries are welcomed to participate in this project and no country is excluded.

15. My third suggestion is for China to solicit the views of countries in the region. China should listen to the region. It should be prepared to incorporate the views and concerns of countries in the region in future iterations of the proposal. The best outcome is for the proposal to evolve from being a Chinese project to being the region's project. It is desirable for China to obtain the region's ownership of its proposal.

## **CONCLUSION**

16. I shall conclude. I support President Xi Jinping's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road proposal because it will bring many benefits to the countries and peoples of the East China Sea, South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. The new road should reflect the spirit and ethos of the Ancient Silk Road. The new road should be linked to the ASEAN Connectivity Masterplan. To succeed, the new road should be open and inclusive, based on the principles of mutual respect, mutual benefit and the rule of law and enjoy the ownership of the region.

17. Thank you.

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