

1 October 2026

Advancing peace and stability in an increasingly turbulent international environment

We are reproducing below a speech given in Beijing by the Minister for Defence of Singapore, Chan Chun Sing, at the 13th Xiangshan Forum, on 16 September. We do so in the hope that Insight readers will find interest in the Minister's prescription for advancing peace and stability in an increasingly turbulent international environment.

Good morning, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honour to be back at the Xiangshan Forum, at the invitation of China Minister of National Defense Admiral Dong Jun and the People's Liberation Army. I look forward to a candid exchange of views with all of you, as we explore how we can advance peace and stability amid an increasingly turbulent international environment.

A World in Flux

Much has changed in the twelve months since I last spoke here. Globally, the distribution of power – both real and perceived – has continued to evolve.

The technology race is heating up. Be it in artificial intelligence, space, or robotics, the competitive gap appears to be narrowing. Military technology is now iterated in days, not years, creating new uncertainties and new perceptions about the balance of both hard and soft power.

The imbalance in consumption and production has also grown, causing dislocations around the world and spurring protectionist reactions in many parts of the world. Trade and investment have been further securitised, and sometimes weaponised. Governments have tightened their grip on supply chains to secure their own strategic advantage and to safeguard their vulnerabilities against rivals. Yet others have tried to weaponise their economic interdependence.

All this, combined with the rapid evolution of warfare, has shaped and reshaped perceptions of relative power.

These are serious trends that all of us have to be concerned with. They exert pressure on countries to preserve and advance their national power at the expense of others. And our shared challenge is this: how do we enhance our own security without being perceived to be threatening the security of others? In isolation, each response may appear justifiable. Collectively, however, each action produces a reaction, and it can lead to a spiral of insecurity that benefits no-one and makes us feel insecure all the more.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

Therefore, it is not enough for each of us to merely ensure our own security. The true test of statecraft is this: how do we strengthen our own security without weakening the security of others, or without aggravating the insecurity of others?

Today, I would like to share three fundamental principles worth bearing in mind as we navigate these uncertain times.

Domestic Stability and External Security are Mutually Reinforcing

First, domestic stability and external security are mutually reinforcing. Confidence at home enables a country to cooperate with partners and act in its enlightened long-term interest internationally. In turn, a favourable external environment affects domestic stability. In today's uncertain world, we must work even harder to strengthen our domestic fundamentals, rather than try to externalise our domestic issues.

Singapore's experience illustrates this. In 1965, our nation was born into crisis. We were beset by ethnic tensions, security challenges, and economic difficulties. The Cold War ran hot in Southeast Asia.

It was critical that our founding leaders achieved domestic political stability very early on. They took urgent and decisive steps to restructure our economy, address the people's needs, and earn their trust. Without all these efforts, Singapore could not have been a credible partner on the regional or international stage.

Our leaders avoided exploiting foreign policy for political gain. Like every country, we had historical issues with our neighbours. But we worked with them to settle these issues amicably in favour of our national and regional interests. For instance, we reached a diplomatic resolution with Indonesia despite the challenges in our nation's early years. Geopolitical shifts, combined with our diplomatic efforts, eventually grew Singapore's space to develop and prosper.

On the other hand, history has given us many examples where domestic difficulties or instability translated into external disruptions. Fiscal crisis and economic hardship were the major triggers for the French Revolution, which led to the Napoleonic Wars and the reordering of Europe. The global economic crisis of the 1930s and the spread of radical ideologies also contributed to the outbreak of World War Two.

Interdependence Breeds Stability

The second principle is that interdependence breeds stability. In the present climate, it is tempting to view interdependence as a source of vulnerability. But history tells us that in the long term, interdependence expands the pool of common interests between disparate countries. It creates the incentive to cooperate, or at least to compete within an agreed set of rules. I must emphasise that competition and rivalry do not mean that we are enemies. Competition and rivalry, if well-managed, can spur all of us to do better.

This is why Singapore has sought to build an open and inclusive external environment since our early days – from working with our neighbours to build up ASEAN, to playing a constructive role in the development of international maritime law.

It is also why we continue to advocate for the preservation of the international rules-based order, which is foundational to global trade and exchanges. For example, Singapore has put on record our refusal to negotiate for the safe passage or toll rates for Straits Used for International Navigation, such as the Strait of Hormuz.

First, Do No Harm

The third principle is the well-known rule of medical ethics: “first, do no harm” even if we cannot solve all the problems. To build trust, we must first not break it.

Trust is vital but brittle. It is built by being consistent, but lost in a single instant. When we have trust, we can resolve difficult issues quietly behind the scenes or as the Chinese saying goes: 大事化小，小事化了 [Translation: De-escalate major issues and resolve minor ones.]. Without trust, small misunderstandings can simmer and become major problems: 小事化大，无事生非 [Translation: Magnify minor issues and create disputes].

This matters in the physical domain. In a congested environment, be it in the air or the sea, mishaps can happen if we are not careful. But this matters even more in “invisible” domains like cyberspace, where intentions are unclear and attribution is not simple.

Rethinking What “Winning” Means

Allow me to summarise these three fundamental principles: confidence at home enables us to cooperate externally; interdependence provides us a better opportunity to build strong international systems; and trust makes cooperation last and enduring. The path to enduring security lies within each of us.

Overcoming the security dilemma requires us to re-think what does ‘winning’ means. To some, ‘winning’ means outgunning or outlasting a rival. But in today’s world, a more realistic conception – and perhaps a stronger and better concept of ‘winning’ – is to ‘win over the world’ through the ‘power of our example’, rather than ‘the example of our power’.

How can we achieve this? Let me offer three practical suggestions.

Be Conscious of How Shifts in Relative Power Alter Perceptions

First, all of us need to be conscious of how shifts in relative power alter perceptions and actions. A country’s view of the world depends on where it stands. Small countries are naturally insecure and in need of more assurance. Great powers thus tend to shoulder higher expectations and responsibilities. A country growing in strength may assert itself to address longstanding grievances and interests. Yet that same growth in strength may look very different to those around it. Smaller countries will look up to it and expect more of it.

In short, in Chinese: 大国多一分担当，小国少一分担忧 [Translation: The more responsible major powers are, the less concerned small countries will be]. Therefore, let us ask ourselves: how do we see ourselves? And how do others see us?

Build Trust Through Strategic Patience

Second, we build trust through strategic patience. Strategic patience is the wisdom to choose the course of action that best serves our long-term interest despite immediate pressures. It is not about letting our external circumstances dictate our actions, or baiting us into chasing short-term wins over enduring advantage. Not every capability needs to be advertised; not every advantage needs to be immediately pressed; and not every provocation demands an immediate response.

As the Chinese philosopher 孟子 [Translation: Mengzi] famously observed: “以力 服人者，非心服也；以德服人者，中心悦而诚服也”. Power may compel others to comply. But in the end, it is trust that truly wins others over.

Continuously Find Concrete Ways to Create Value Together

Third, we must continuously find concrete ways to create value together. Every country's starting point is its own national interests, and this is a fact. The object of diplomacy is not to deny these interests, but to find out where they can overlap, and build real cooperation within that shared space.

Singapore's relationship with China illustrates this. We supported China's Reform and Opening Up (改革开放) from the very beginning. Well before the World Trade Organisation (WTO), in the 1980s, Singapore advocated for China's entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and we launched our first Government-to-Government Project, Suzhou Industrial Park, in 1994. Hence, despite our differences in perspectives and ideology, history, geography, or even the size of our populations, our leaders found common ground to cooperate for mutual benefit. This pragmatic approach continues to guide Singapore today.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, periods of great change can be daunting because they force us to adapt. Yet it is precisely at these moments that countries can, and must, work together to shape the world we want to see. We all have responsibilities. We all have agency.

Singapore welcomes China's aspiration to be a “responsible major country”. China's Reform and Opening Up transformed the lives of its people and contributed greatly to the prosperity of the region and the world. Similarly, China has made great strides in its military modernisation. As the PLA approaches its centenary, there is much potential for it to make a positive contribution to global stability and security.

To conclude, allow me to reiterate the three fundamental principles I have shared today, but this time, in Chinese:

国泰民安，合作无妨。

唇齿相依，合作无疑。

以德服人，合作无限。

[Translation:

Confidence at home enables us to cooperate externally;

Interdependence provides us a better opportunity to build strong international systems;

And trust makes cooperation last and enduring.]

Thank you very much.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

The Ambassador Partnership can help in connecting with networks around the world, with insights for business and government policy, to address global challenges

To discuss how we can help you please contact:

Tracey Stewart

Partnership Secretary

tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

www.ambassadorllp.com