

DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam at the 39th Singapore Lecture

His Excellency Mark Rutte, Prime Minister of the Netherlands; Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Masagos Zulkifli and Cabinet colleagues; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen

A very warm welcome to the 39th Singapore Lecture. It is my pleasure to welcome Prime Minister Mark Rutte on his first Official Visit to Singapore. The Singapore Lecture has been privileged in the past to have welcomed two of Mr Rutte's predecessors - former PM Ruud Lubbers who delivered the 11th Singapore Lecture on International Economic Developments in 1991, and former PM Jan Balkenende who gave the 30th Singapore Lecture on New Global Partnerships in 2009. Today, Prime Minister Rutte carries on the strong tradition, reflecting the high regard we have always held for the Netherlands.

The Netherlands and Singapore share longstanding and deep bonds which were developed well before our independence in 1965. The Dutch have also left a strong and positive imprint on modern-day Singapore. Dutch economist Albert Winsemius' advice was invaluable in helping Singapore find a role for itself in the world economy quickly after independence.

Today, we have a robust economic relationship with the Netherlands. It is our 3rd largest European trading partner and 5th largest global investor, with over 1,300 Dutch companies based in Singapore.

We also feel connected to each other because Singapore and the Netherlands are global-minded and practical-minded countries. Being connected to the world has always been part of our history and our beliefs. As pioneers of ASEAN and the European Union, respectively, we are firm advocates of regional integration. We also share a deep commitment to open economies as the foundation for global prosperity and security.

In this regard, the EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (EUSFTA), when ratified, will strengthen our economic links. We also look forward to the EU-ASEAN Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (CATA), which will improve our connectivity and people-to-people ties.

On the international stage, the Netherlands is an active promoter of international peace and legal order, as evidenced in the Dutch support of counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, and its active contributions to UN peacekeeping efforts in conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Mali, and South Sudan. In this regard, I would like to congratulate the Netherlands on its successful bid as a non-permanent member on the United Nations Security Council in 2018.

Looking forward, we face an uncertain and complex regional and global environment. In Europe, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union earlier this year has added to the already challenging agenda facing Europe. As the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome approaches in 2017, the European project is facing enhanced challenge domestically in several of its member states. Strong leadership and active policies to help those who lose out because of technological change or global competition are needed to reinvigorate inclusive growth and preserve faith in internationalism.

But before we hear the views of our distinguished speaker, a brief introduction: Prime Minister Rutte began his political career as State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment in 2002, and was appointed State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science in 2004. Before that, he had over 10 years of experience in the private sector, including at Dutch multinational Unilever. When he was elected in 2010 at the age of 43, he was the Netherlands' second-youngest Prime Minister. Mr Rutte is well known for his pragmatism, optimism and energy – qualities he displayed when the Netherlands assumed the presidency of the European Council during the first half of 2016 when the EU had to deal with some of its biggest challenges, in particular the migrant crisis and the immediate outcome of the Brexit referendum. Domestically, he has displayed a similar steady hand and clear vision, especially in guiding the Dutch economy out from the global financial crisis to its current position of strength and stability.

Without further ado, let me invite Prime Minister Rutte to deliver the 39th Singapore Lecture on the “The Netherlands, Singapore, our Regions, our World: Connecting our Common Future”. Thank you.