



**P R I M E
M I N I S T E R**

**ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY THE PRIME MINISTER
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AT THE S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (RSIS)**

“TIMOR-LESTE AND ASEAN: A NEW CHAPTER IN THE REGION’S STORY”

Singapore

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Palácio do Governo,
Avenida Presidente Nicolau Lobato,
Dili, Timor-Leste

Excellencies

Distinguished scholars,
Students, and friends,

It is a pleasure to return to Singapore and an honour to speak, once again, at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

When I last stood here, in 2013, I reflected on the motto of the RSIS – ‘ponder the improbable’.

In my address I pondered the improbable journey of the Timorese people: from centuries of colonial rule, through occupation and resistance, to independence and development driven by peace.

I also spoke of the improbable events shaping world affairs.

One was the Global Financial Crisis — unexpected and far-reaching. Its impact continues to erode public trust in financial and political institutions across the West and around the world.

Another was the Arab Spring. Few people then could have imagined that a single act of defiance in a small Tunisian town would trigger a wave of upheaval across the region — echoes of which shape the story of the Middle East today.

Twelve years have passed, and today we face even greater change and challenges — both unexpected and transformative.

We see war in the Middle East and Ukraine, internal conflicts in fragile states in Africa and around the world, the emergence of artificial intelligence, the collapse of international law and trade policy being used as a tool of power.

And yet, amid this great change, the forces that define our age — which I spoke of twelve years ago — continue to shape our world.

Fragile states are more vulnerable than ever. Inequality is becoming more entrenched.

Around the world, the harm we are doing to our climate, to our environment and to our shared resources puts our very future at risk.

Extreme poverty persists – exposing the depth of the international system's failure to help the developing world.

These challenges are more tangled, more urgent and more unforgiving than ever.

That is why institutions like the RSIS matter. I want to thank you for hosting me again. You continue to play an essential role in deepening understanding of our region's security, diplomacy and development. In a time of global uncertainty, your mission is more vital than ever.

Singapore itself offers a powerful example. As a small state in a complex region, it has navigated well in this divided world with clarity and skill - balancing relationships without compromising its interests and principles.

Singapore also offers a unique example of national development — building a modern, high-income economy through strategic leadership, long-term vision and a deep commitment to social cohesion.

As a fellow small state, Timor-Leste is inspired by this example. We may not share all of Singapore's strengths, but we share its need to be resilient, to navigate change and to speak with purpose in an unpredictable world.

It is in that spirit that I speak to you today - not to recount our past, but to share how Timor-Leste sees the future of our region, and how we can contribute to it.

When I addressed the RSIS in 2013, Timor-Leste was still emerging from the long shadow of occupation and conflict.

I remember visiting villages in the mountains during those years – speaking with families who had lost everything, yet still believed in the future we were trying to build. They wanted our struggle to mean something - and to offer their children a life of dignity and hope.

We were consolidating peace and building the foundations of a functioning State from the ground up - with weak institutions, limited human resources and having gone through a complex process of reconciliation, both with Indonesia and within our own society.

Since then, we have made great progress. We have strengthened our institutions of State, built infrastructure across our country and developed State capacity to meet the needs of our people.

We have secured peace and built a liberal democracy – with an open economy, a free society and a firm commitment to human rights and the rule of law.

But we remain a young and developing country. Our challenges are real. And we face them in a global environment that is less stable, less fair and less predictable.

The certainties of the past have gone. The institutions of the post-war order are breaking down.

Great power rivalry has returned to our region. Economic cooperation is no longer considered a path to peace, but a source of strategic risk.

Nations speak of upholding a rules-based order – but it seems that international law only applies when it is in the interests of great powers.

The best example of international law having no application is what we are witnessing in Gaza, where violations of humanitarian law have caused intolerable suffering for the Palestinian people.

A multipolar world is emerging, just as multilateral institutions grow weaker.

And we have a United Nations that is powerless to respond effectively to war, climate change and rising inequality.

This is not a 'new world order', but a 'world of disorder'.

This is also the world our region must navigate - and in which ASEAN now operates.

In this world, ASEAN matters more than ever.

For nearly six decades, ASEAN has helped transform a once divided region into one of the most stable and cooperative in the world.

Its core principles – non-interference, consensus, peaceful dispute resolution and mutual respect – have provided a foundation for trust among very different nations.

It is not always easy. There are disagreements within ASEAN, as there are in any family. But those disagreements have been managed with restraint, dialogue and a long-term commitment to shared peace and prosperity.

Timor-Leste admires this achievement. ASEAN is not just an institution, it is a manifestation of a regional culture of cooperation – one that has allowed countries with different histories, political systems and levels of development to sit at the same table and work together.

ASEAN has shown – as Timor-Leste learned the hard way – that there can be no development without peace, and no peace without development.

In doing so, ASEAN has helped turn Southeast Asia from a theatre of the Cold War into one of the world's most dynamic regions of growth and stability.

Timor-Leste is part of Southeast Asia. Our journey to independence was shaped by international solidarity.

While it took 24 years of occupation, and great sacrifice by the Timorese people, the United Nations and international law came to play a critical role – and regional support mattered.

In our transition to independence, we understood that to be a responsible and stable State, we had to be a good neighbour.

That is why we appreciate so well the importance of not upsetting the security and strategic balance of our region.

That is why our first priority was reconciliation with Indonesia.

That is why multilateralism and regional cooperation are central to our foreign policy, and to how we understand and exercise sovereignty.

We applied for ASEAN membership with the strong encouragement of Indonesia.

We were aware of the gap between our capacities and those of many ASEAN members – in infrastructure, human resources and economic strength.

But we were also aware that we are part of Southeast Asia – and that in this uncertain world we could not stand alone.

In ASEAN, we see a framework that upholds sovereignty – but one that also requires each of us to exercise it with care, with restraint and with regard for our neighbours.

We have deep respect for the principles of ASEAN, as set out in the ASEAN Charter.

These include:

- respect for independence, sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member states
- a shared commitment and collective responsibility in enhancing regional peace, security and prosperity
- adherence to the rule of law, good governance and the principles of democracy and constitutional government
- respect for fundamental freedoms and the promotion and protection of human rights
- and, the centrality of ASEAN.

We see ASEAN as a community of nations committed to peace, mutual respect and shared progress.

We support the principle of non-interference. We understand, as well as any nation, the pain that comes from foreign interference and domination.

And we also believe that a people-centred ASEAN must respect the dignity and rights of its citizens.

These are not competing ASEAN values — they are complementary. And they matter even more in a world that is growing less stable.

We now live in an increasingly multipolar world — shaped by many centres of power, each with its own history, interests and view of the world.

This diversity brings complexity, but also opportunity. It is an environment that the ASEAN family understands well — and one it can navigate with experience.

With fresh thinking, careful diplomacy and a renewed commitment to rules and cooperation, ASEAN can help navigate the challenges of a world growing more fractured, more contested and more uncertain.

But as recent international developments unfold, the challenge is growing more difficult.

Too many powerful nations no longer even pretend to uphold international law. Where once the conduct of global affairs was framed in the language of law, even that façade has now fallen away.

The rhetoric of a ‘rules-based order’ is too often invoked to give the illusion of principle — applied when convenient, ignored when it is not. That is not a system of law. It is a system of power.

If we allow this to continue, international law will become nothing more than a history lesson taught in universities — a memory of how the world once tried to prevent violence with principle.

This erosion of global norms is not just visible in war. It is also evident in peace.

The global economy — once a driver of shared prosperity — now serves the interests of the few.

For many countries, the promise of development remains out of reach, as extreme inequality becomes further entrenched.

In refusing to acknowledge this structural reality, the West has run out of answers to remedy global poverty.

Fragile countries remain trapped — subject to decisions made by powerful nations that have long dictated how others should be governed.

That is why Timor-Leste was an inaugural member of the g7+ — a platform for fragile countries to speak with one voice, to demand ownership of our development paths and recognition of the unique challenges we face in building resilient States and lasting peace.

Twenty fragile, post-conflict developing nations are now members of the g7+ which, since 2019, has Observer Status at the United Nations.

Ladies and gentlemen, Timor-Leste seeks full ASEAN membership with a strong sense of responsibility — and a deep sense of belonging.

We see ourselves not as outsiders joining a club, but as Southeast Asians formally joining a regional family.

We believe that the global challenges of fragile states, extreme poverty, widespread conflict, entrenched inequality and environmental destruction, make ASEAN more important than ever.

ASEAN is one of the few regional groupings in the world that has managed to preserve both cohesion and independence.

It has refused to become a proxy for any great power. It has chosen consensus over coercion. And it has prioritised diplomacy over division.

This is not a small achievement — and it should not be taken for granted. In the face of destabilising geopolitical shifts, ASEAN continues to prove its relevance for the future, both globally and to the people of our region.

It presents a coherent voice for regional stability, independence and prosperity – with ASEAN centrality at its heart.

Timor-Leste has studied the commitments, the obligations and the institutions of ASEAN.

We are aligning our national laws and policies to meet the requirements of membership.

We are investing in our institutions and our people to ensure we can contribute meaningfully across all three ASEAN pillars: the Political-Security Community, the Economic Community and the Socio-Cultural Community.

For us, membership of ASEAN is not a destination – it is not an end in itself.

It is a framework for regional peace and prosperity that we want to contribute to – and defend.

We bring to ASEAN a strong commitment to cooperation, a common vision and purpose.

We have a young population eager to learn and grow. And we offer opportunities in tourism, agriculture and natural resources.

We are also promoting our Blue Economy to support sustainable development and protect our marine biodiversity and environment.

We seek not just investment, but also ideas, partnerships and solidarity.

Our country's Strategic Development Plan sets out a long-term vision for inclusive growth, infrastructure development and human capital investment.

ASEAN can be central to that vision — and we believe that Timor-Leste, in turn, can add value to ASEAN.

We all want a region that is peaceful, connected and prosperous.

And we believe this future lies in deeper cooperation and greater inclusion — where no country in our region is left behind, and every voice has a place at the table.

Regional integration will be essential to that vision and to building a stronger, more resilient community — one that draws strength from its diversity and remains united in the face of uncertainty.

Timor-Leste looks forward to the ASEAN Summit in October. We welcome the strong support we have received from countries for our accession to ASEAN.

Timor-Leste seeks to join ASEAN with a deep sense of responsibility and a great sense of optimism.

We do so not to stand alone, but to stand with others — to work together, speak together and grow together.

Our hope is simple: that the next chapter of Southeast Asia's story will be written by all of us — in common purpose, and with a shared belief in peace, dignity and the power of regional solidarity.

Thank you very much.