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# **Keynote Address by SMS (Foreign Affairs) and SMS (Transport) Chee Hong Tat at the 14th Japan- Singapore Symposium, 18 March 2021**

18 March 2021

Your Excellency State Minister for Foreign Affairs Washio Eiichiro

Chairman of the Japan-Singapore Parliamentary Friendship League  
Shiozaki Yasuhisa

Co-Chairmen Ambassador Sasae Kenichiro and Ambassador Tommy  
Koh

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1 Good morning. I am delighted to be here today at the 14<sup>th</sup> Japan-Singapore Symposium (JSS) to address this very distinguished gathering.

2 Even though we are unable to gather in person due to COVID-19, I am glad that we have leveraged technology to allow us to virtually convene and sustain the momentum of the JSS, which has proven over the years to be an important platform for our bilateral exchanges and friendship. Since its inception in 1995, the JSS has regularly brought together leading figures and opinion-shapers from Singapore and Japan to exchange views on bilateral, regional and global issues of the day, which has helped to cross-pollinate ideas and enhance mutual understanding. It is a showcase of the close and longstanding relations that our countries enjoy.

### *Bilateral Relations*

3 The JSS takes on additional significance this year because 2021 marks the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties between Singapore and Japan. Our relations have been excellent over the decades, underpinned by frequent high-level exchanges, strong economic links, and multi-faceted cooperation. Despite the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have kept up the momentum of our interactions via videoconferences and phone calls, including between our Prime Ministers and Ministers in charge of Foreign Affairs and Economics Affairs, amongst many others. Singapore also welcomed the visits of Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and Minister in charge of Administrative Reform Kono Taro in August and December 2020 respectively. We look forward to more of such exchanges to propel our relations to even greater heights.

4 Our economic linkages are robust and continue to grow. At its heart is the Japan-Singapore Economic Partnership Agreement, or JSEPA, Japan's first bilateral economic partnership agreement and Singapore's first with a major trading partner. Singapore and Japan rank among each other's top trading partners, with bilateral trade

standing at close to S\$50 billion in 2020. We are also amongst each other's top investors, with investments branching out from traditional areas such as logistics, real estate and trading, to new sectors like food services, healthcare and precision engineering.

5 Another key pillar of the Singapore-Japan relationship is our close and multi-faceted cooperation, which has continued apace notwithstanding the challenges of COVID-19. In fact, the pandemic has opened doors to even greater cooperation between our countries. Our Trade Ministers expressed commitment to maintaining supply chain connectivity via a Joint Statement on Facilitating Resilient Economic Activities for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in May 2020. We established a Reciprocal Green Lane for essential business and official travel, which was Japan's first Business Track with another country, in September 2020. While this has been temporarily suspended, we look forward to its resumption when the COVID-19 situation improves. Singapore and Japan have also worked closely on vaccine multilateralism with other partners through the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access, or COVAX Facility, over the past year.

6 Singapore will continue to cooperate closely with Japan as we chart our paths toward a post-COVID recovery. Our countries have started vaccinations against COVID-19, which bodes well for the reopening of our economies, restoration of connectivity, and resumption of people-to-people exchanges. In this regard, we look forward to working with Japan and other countries on the issue of mutual recognition of COVID-19 vaccination certificates. Japan also has our strong support for its hosting of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in the summer of 2021.

7 The huge potential for Singapore-Japan cooperation in new areas, including digitalisation, smart cities, and green economy, will support our countries' post-COVID economic recovery. I witnessed first-hand Singapore's collaborations with Japanese industry partners on innovative energy solutions as far back as 10 years ago, at the launch of

Panasonic's Total Energy Solutions Test-Bed Project for Public Housing in Singapore in 2011, and I am confident that we can do more together as we look to the future.

8 There will also be many collaboration opportunities given the common challenges our societies face, such as ageing and climate change. These were topics that I discussed with Japanese government and business leaders when I visited Fukuoka, Osaka and Tokyo in 2019. During that trip, I visited Japanese companies such as Kajima and Omron, and I was impressed with how they combine advanced technology with clever design, to make their products and processes efficient and user-friendly. The never-ending pursuit of perfection through continuous improvement and the respect for craftsmanship are also values from Japanese culture that we hope to emulate.

9 Meanwhile, the growing demand for infrastructure in the region has also spurred mutually-beneficial partnerships between Singapore and Japanese companies to develop infrastructure projects in third countries. I am happy that Singapore's Infrastructure Asia and Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on 5 March to promote cooperation between Japan and Singapore-based companies on regional infrastructure projects.

### *Regional Partners*

10 Singapore and Japan are natural partners on the regional front, given our shared commitment to regional economic integration and upholding the open, rules-based multilateral trading system. In the face of growing protectionist and inward-looking sentiments, our countries have worked closely together at regional and international platforms to advance multilateralism and free trade. We cooperate closely as members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, RCEP. In particular, Singapore

appreciates the leadership Japan provided towards the successful conclusion of RCEP last year. We also look forward to supporting Japan in its CPTPP chairmanship this year.

11 Our countries also work closely in the ASEAN context, where Japan is one of ASEAN's most substantial and longstanding Dialogue Partners. The relationship between ASEAN and Japan is wide-ranging and substantive, spanning areas such as smart cities, trade, economic cooperation, disaster management, and counter-terrorism. Both sides have continued to further our cooperation even amid COVID-19, which is testament to our strong relationship. This includes the ASEAN-Japan Economic Resilience Action Plan adopted by the ASEAN and Japanese Economic Ministers in July 2020 to improve supply chain connectivity, promote trade facilitation, and explore opportunities in digital trade and e-commerce. We also appreciate Japan's contribution towards the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, which was launched at the 23<sup>rd</sup> ASEAN-Japan Summit in November 2020.

12 Looking ahead, ASEAN-Japan cooperation will also pave the way for the region's post-COVID economic recovery. We welcome Japan's continued engagement of Southeast Asia and support for the region's development, as it has done over the years. Last year, our Leaders adopted the Joint Statement on ASEAN-Japan Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). We look forward to the implementation of this Joint Statement through practical initiatives and cooperation. The Statement made clear that there are abundant opportunities for closer cooperation between ASEAN and Japan in forward-looking areas amid the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In this regard, we appreciate Japan's efforts to facilitate partnerships between ASEAN cities and Japanese companies on smart city solutions, including through the Second ASEAN-Japan High-Level Forum on Smart Cities which Japan hosted in December 2020. Such initiatives will place not only Singapore and Japan, but also the region, in good stead for a steady and sustainable recovery in our post-COVID future.

13 Before I conclude my speech, please allow me to share some thoughts on what Mr Lee Kuan Yew called the special “X factor” in Japan’s culture. This is reflected in the resilience of the Japanese people to overcome great adversity, including the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami on 11 March ten years ago. Despite the sudden and devastating damage to their homes, we saw how the Japanese people supported and cared for one another in the community. They lined up for food and blankets in a calm and orderly manner at the distribution centres, collecting only what they required because there were others in the queue who also needed these provisions.

14 In another country, there may be fights in the queue as people jostle to get as much for themselves as possible, without thinking about the impact on others in the community. When it comes to being civic-minded and considerate, Japan is a role model for many countries. This special “X factor” is something I hope we can learn from our Japanese friends.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15 The candid and robust exchange of views that has always taken place at the JSS reflects the close and longstanding relations between our two countries. I am confident that the discussions held over these two days will contribute useful insights and ideas to further strengthen our cooperation. Thank you.

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**Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

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