

IPS-Nathan Lecture Series | Dr Noeleen Heyzer | 27th February 2024
Singapore and Multilateral Governance: Securing our Future | Book Launch

It is a great honour to launch this book in the presence of our Guest of Honour, Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, and all of your excellencies, dear friends, and colleagues this evening. I know that many of you have such a lot to do, but you took time to come, and I just want to say a big thank you. And I have to thank Prof Tommy Koh, and everyone else who have actually made sure that I was always on the right track. Normally on these kinds of journeys, you are never alone. And so many people contribute to the kind of community that support you.

I have to confess that the launch was delayed for over a year due to my last United Nations (UN) assignment. But it is even more timely given the current threats in our turbulent world, and the upcoming UN Summit for the Future later this year which Minister will be attending and leading. My thanks to IPS Director Janadas Devan, whom I knew as a young boy for his very kind and thoughtful introduction. Also, a big thanks to your staff for pulling all this together under your leadership. And Minister, thank you for your very insightful remarks. You have put everything together so beautifully, and also pushed us into the future.

Now about the book, this book delves into the crucial task of securing our future. Singapore's trajectory — past, present, and future — is linked to and reliant on multilateral governance. With decolonisation, countries survive better in a world governed by the rule of law and where there are international norms that respect the sovereignty of states. From the very start of nationhood, Singapore applied for UN membership which was crucial for international recognition, territorial integrity, and self-determination. Now, as Janadas has already said, as the world's only island city-state, remaining isolated has never been a viable option in our transition from third world to first. But both Singapore and Asia have reaped tremendous benefits from the rule-based multilateral global order established post WWII, grounded in shared values, norms, and institutions, and fostered a global community.

Across this three-part lecture series, I reflected on how Singapore has experienced multilateral governance and how our country can contribute to its strengthening

amidst the complex challenges of the 21st century. As the rule-based multilateral system has now been weakened and can no longer be relied upon to ensure peace and security for all, how can we build upon the enduring vision of the UN Charter and create a new inclusive and effective multilateralism? What does Singapore's engagement with, and rejuvenation of this multilateral landscape entail? How do we ensure future global security and simultaneously shape what we become as a nation in a networked and emerging multipolar world?

The book embarks on a brief journey through time. My first lecture, “**Grand Transitions: Our Multilateral Journey**”, looked at grand transitions that have shaped our world. So, let me invite you to cast your minds to a pivotal moment in world history, nearly 80 years ago. The aftermath of World War II was marked by immense devastation, with 85 million lives lost and the world left wounded, fractured, and dehumanised. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki underscored humanity's capacity for destruction and raised existential questions about our future. In response, world leaders of 50 nations convened in San Francisco in 1945, their task was nothing less but to establish a new rule-based world order grounded in trust and cooperation. The United Nations Charter emerged from their solidarity, their political skills and collective leadership, pledging to safeguard future generations from the horrors of war and uphold the dignity of every single individual. This was a historical moment of courage, it was a moment that heralded the dawn of a new era in multilateral governance, offering hope for a more peaceful and secure world.

How have we fared? Over the decades, the principles of multilateralism have guided us, delivering independence, peace, and prosperity for billions. However, deep divides and challenges remain. Billions of people are still marginalised, excluded from the benefits of technology, from social and economic progress, or caught in conflicts they did not create. Events like the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted vulnerabilities requiring serious attention. The lecture looks at Singapore's journey, influenced by its mindset, choices, and partnerships, which has contributed to the development of "Rising Asia." The first lecture demonstrates that multilateral governance works best with responsible corporate governance and when effective democratic governance is practiced by UN member states. It acknowledges the gaps between multilateral norms and their

impact on people's lives, stressing the need for alignment between aspiration and practice. As we strive for a secure future, we must address the root causes of instability, emphasise the importance of international cooperation, solidarity as self-interest, and advocate for multilateral governance informed by both its successes and failures.

In my second lecture, I explored the topic of “**Great Disruptions: Struggle for Our Normative Future**”. Humanity now stands at a crossroads, where the effectiveness of multilateral governance and our individual choices will determine whether we face breakdown or breakthrough in the face of four current major disruptions. And these are, the global health pandemics which we have just experienced, climate crises, challenges of the cyber world, and global conflicts. These interconnected disruptions pose unprecedented threats to human well-being and sustainability, requiring new normative frameworks in multilateral governance.

I underscored the importance of investing in sustainable and inclusive development, global health, peace, and human security as essential global public goods. Now, how do we navigate these challenges? Can Singapore play a pivotal role in shaping the multilateral landscape? My lecture examines Singapore's leadership in amplifying the voices and interests of medium and small states in multilateral forums, supporting vaccine multilateralism, taking climate action, and creating a cohesive and more gender-equal society. In so doing, our country is contributing to a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable normative future where more individuals can thrive. The key message is how we act as a country, as a group and as individuals can make a big difference.

My third and final lecture, “**Securing Our Future: A Renewed Multilateralism,**” directs our attention to the challenges and opportunities ahead. Dear friends and Excellencies, our current era parallels the pivotal moments faced by previous generations. The framework of multilateral governance, which has safeguarded our present, requires revitalisation and reinforcement to address the interconnected disruptions threatening our future.

While the United Nations remains crucial, its efficacy has waned, making it insufficient to ensure global peace and security alone. There is great urgency to

rebuild the functioning and credibility of the multilateral system as we are all witnessing in the wake of the Gaza crisis. The world's failure to act swiftly and decisively to impose a ceasefire in Gaza, protect civilian lives and infrastructure, and prevent what the UN Secretary General has called "a crisis of humanity" and "a graveyard for children" has shattered global confidence in the multilateral system.

The gravity of our historical moment cannot be overstated. We are watching international humanitarian law and human rights laws get cast aside in the absence of a robust mechanism of enforcement. The stakes are high. The world cannot afford to wait any longer to promote accountability, address double standards, the breakdown of trust, and to restore faith in a rule-based world order that is now on life support. This requires exceptional leadership from all nations to work collectively to rebuild a more effective and credible multilateral framework starting with the long overdue reform of some of its key institutions and rules to prevent future crises and devastation.

To shape the future we desire, we must repair trust and solidarity, restore social inclusion and dignity, and revalue care for each other and our planet. This requires global action through enhanced multilateralism, but this time complemented by local and regional efforts by nations and corporations, as well as movements and networks of people around the world, grounded in community and individual empowerment, but bolstered by global solidarity.

It falls upon our generation to revitalise the rule-based multilateral order, ensuring the security of our shared future. How we respond to this critical task will define our legacy. What vision do we hold for Singapore's society? What role will we play in shaping our collective destiny? In the lecture, I shared some important points outlined in the UN Secretary-General António Guterres' report on "Our Common Agenda" for the upcoming UN Summit of the Future: he talked about a renewed global social contract; governance of our global commons and public goods; a new agenda for peace which he has put a lot of emphasis on, and an inclusive-networked-effective multilateralism. I reflected on three ways that Singapore can secure its future in our changing world by contributing to the larger well-being of people and the planet: a hub for global public health; a digital hub for cybersecurity;

a financial hub for an inclusive and sustainable future. Singapore's success as a nation together with our multilateral diplomacy has enhanced our international profile, expanded our network of friends, and protected our interest as a small country. The question now is, can Singapore now emerge as a beacon and a discussion space for the new multilateralism, advocating for both enlightened self-preservation and committed stewardship of global public goods and our global commons? These questions guide us as we strive to construct a sustainable, peaceful, and fair future.

Now, as I look around today, there is such exceptional people and talents just here alone. So let us dare to reimagine our world and collaborate to rebuild multilateral governance fit for the 21st century. If we succeed, it will be our children's turn to recount how our generation rose to great challenges, healed deep divisions, weathered storms of anger and hatred, and secured a future where coming generations can flourish. We owe it to our future generations.

I hope that the three lectures in this book will ignite constructive conversations toward envisioning a promising future — a future that celebrates the human spirit, where every person can live in peace, freedom, and dignity, and most of all where our humanity can prevail.

I thank all of you for coming this afternoon.