

President Tharman Shanmugaratnam,
Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Professor Danny Quah,
Director of the Institute of Policy Studies Mr Janadas Devan,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you, Mr President and Mrs Tharman, for coming to launch my new book. I very much appreciate the privilege. I am also very grateful to Mr Janadas for inviting me to give the series of lectures in honour of Mr S R Nathan, former president of the republic.

1. Having the book launch take place where I began my life of learning on this campus is a special pleasure. That generation of students was engrossed with the task of nation-building that caught my imagination: how to build something new from a retreating empire. I was particularly attracted to those questions that focused on the mix of local communities, their languages, and different cultures.
2. In that context, two images left a deep impression. One was that our region had many cultures and now had a name for itself. This was Southeast Asia, an untidy place that just had its borders drawn: with China on one side and India on the other. The other image was that of powerful European empires using their modern civilisation to show that ancient Asian civilisations were all obsolete.
3. These raised questions I could not understand, and the questions followed me around in my later studies. Director Janadas' invitation to give the IPS-Nathan Lectures has given me a chance to take a closer look at the two images after several decades.
4. Southeast Asia consists of modernising nations in search of a regional identity. Its numerous polities had over three millennia enriched their local cultures by selecting what they needed from four ancient civilisations, as the President mentioned. In different ways and to different degrees, they have chosen from the Indic, the Sinic, the Islamic, and the European Christian civilisations.
5. After the 18th century, global imperial powers expanded to dominate the world with their modern Enlightenment civilisation. Although our region came under their control, its local communities stayed in contact with the ancient civilisations. The region's leaders observed how those civilisations responded to the challenge of modernisation without adopting any single model. As in the past, Southeast Asian communities remained open and inclusive, as they enabled their local cultures to evolve to become modern national cultures.
6. Singapore as an independent republic has many unique features. But it has shared this experience of openness and inclusivity. It chose to be modern in its own way and joined the region in supporting the search for a peaceful way for all civilisations to live together.
7. Mr President, forgive me if I seem to be presumptuous to talk about large entities like nations and civilisations in four short lectures. I offer no more than my thoughts

on what the modernising civilisations could mean to our region. I respect the integrity of national cultures everywhere, but I believe that none today can claim that it stands for the universal values for all humankind.

8. I leave you with that thought. Thank you very much.