

Speech: Foreign Secretary Hunt: “Britain’s role in a post-Brexit world”

Introduction

I’d like to thank the International Institute for Strategic Studies for giving me the huge honour of delivering this Fullerton Lecture and I’m delighted to be here in Singapore and to renew Britain’s ties with one of our closest and oldest friends.

Our two countries are joined at the hip not just by common interests and our shared dedication to the rule of law, but by a shared history that has bound our two peoples together for 200 years – almost to the day.

Just over a century ago, the great naval strategist, Admiral John Fisher, identified Singapore as one of “five keys” of the world.

The sights and sounds of this remarkable city vindicate his judgement today as then.

From the cranes in the world’s second busiest container port to the towers of a thriving financial centre, Singapore exemplifies the dynamism and vitality of Asia.

And as the natural junction between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, Singapore has turned itself into the greatest artery for trade in the world, transited by cargo ships 84,000 times in 2017 alone.

Alongside this prodigious development, nearly half of Singapore remains green and lush, including the Botanic Gardens, your first World Heritage Site, and home to a rainforest forming part of Her Majesty the Queen’s Commonwealth Canopy.

For a relatively new British Foreign Secretary there are few better sources of wisdom than the late, great Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who served as prime minister of Singapore for three decades and influenced a generation of leaders, including Henry Kissinger and Margaret Thatcher.

So let me start by turning to his lecture on the ‘Fundamentals of Singapore’s Foreign Policy’, delivered in 2009.

“Friendship in international relations is not a function of goodwill or personal affection,” he said. “We must make ourselves relevant so that other countries have an interest in our continued survival and prosperity.”

Words we in Britain should heed in this momentous year in our history.

Thanks to that history, the UK probably has better connections across the

globe than nearly any other country. But we cannot depend on sentiment or affection to be relevant to others. Nor should we assume that because of past achievements others will have an interest in our future success.

Not unless we are able to link our success to the success of others – or, as Lee Kuan Yew would have said, make ourselves relevant – and today I want to discuss exactly how we do that.

Singapore's example

Like Britain on 29th March this year, Singapore too faced an extraordinary challenge back on 9th August 1965 when it separated from its larger neighbour.

In Lee Kuan Yew's famous words: "Some countries are born independent. Some achieve independence. Singapore had independence thrust upon it."

Yet his memoirs record how not everyone shared his anguish, least of all the investors who swiftly decided that "independence was good for the economy". By the second day, the value of almost all of Singapore's industrial stocks was climbing.

And over the next five decades, Singapore's real per capita GDP would multiply fifteen-fold to reach \$58,000 a head.

Today, Singapore has risen to become the eighth richest country in the world per capita, surpassing Germany, France, Sweden and – though I whisper it softly – the United Kingdom.

As we leave the European Union, Britain can draw encouragement from how Singapore's separation from the Peninsula did not make it more insular but more open. In Lee Kuan Yew's phrase, 1965 marked the moment when Singapore "plugged into the international economic grid".

The transformation of a territory measuring only 26 miles from east to west – wholly devoid of natural resources – was based on unleashing the boundless talent and ambition of Singapore's people, including by creating schools with the best results in the world.

What was right for Singapore won't always be right for Britain. We are committed to our social model and as a former Health Secretary I am particularly proud of our National Health Service with universal provision, free at the point of use, and in which my counterpart, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, worked with great dedication for two years.

But there is much we can learn from Singapore, not least the excellence of its education system, the long term investment in infrastructure and a strategic approach to how a nation sustains competitive advantage in the world.

The international order under threat

Britain and its allies were instrumental in setting up the international

order that has broadly existed since 1945.

This assembly of rules and institutions – including multilateral bodies like the United Nations, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation – has combined with an American-led security umbrella to create the conditions for peace, stability and trade, allowing more human beings to lift themselves out of poverty than ever before in history.

Singapore symbolises what is possible with a peaceful and stable international order.

Yet as we look around at the start of 2019, all is not well.

What is wonkishly called the rules-based international system is under greater strain than for many decades – and the evidence is all around us.

In Europe, Russia has annexed 10,000 square miles of Ukraine, seizing the territory of another member of the United Nations by force of arms, in breach of the first principle of international law.

Then, last March, the Kremlin deployed a Novichok nerve agent in Salisbury, the first time a chemical weapon has ever been used on British soil.

In 2017, VX nerve agent was employed in this region to assassinate a North Korean citizen in Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

In the Middle East, the Assad regime has used chemical weapons against its own people in Syria, defying a global ban on these instruments of death that dates back to the Geneva Protocol of 1925. At the same time, Iran has continued its highly destabilising interference in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

In Asia, we saw the expulsion of over 700,000 Rohingya refugees from their homes in Burma, alongside horrific mass killings and rape by the Tatmadaw, the Burmese army, in a brutal act of ethnic cleansing.

And across the world, we can see that far from advancing – as it did when the Berlin Wall fell – democracy is now in retreat. Freedom House reports that 71 countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties in 2017 and by 2030, for the first time in our lifetimes, the world's biggest economy won't be a democracy – or even want to become one.

Britain post-Brexit

So where does post-Brexit Britain fit into this picture?

We need to begin with a realistic assessment of our global position. That means not overestimating our strength but not underestimating it either.

We are not a superpower and we don't have an empire.

But we do have the fifth biggest economy in the world, the second biggest military budget in NATO, the third biggest overseas aid budget, one of the

two largest financial centres, the global language, highly effective intelligence services and a world class diplomatic network, including permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council.

We also have immense reserves of soft power, with three of the world's top ten universities, 450,000 students from overseas in higher education, 39 million visits by tourists in 2017, and a global audience for our media, especially the BBC, measured in the hundreds of millions.

Most importantly, in a world where it is rarely possible for one country to achieve its ambitions alone, we have some of the best connections of any country – whether through the Commonwealth, our alliance with the United States or our friendship with our neighbours in Europe.

Those connections mean that, in this part of the world, Britain is amongst only a handful of European countries with an Embassy or a High Commission in every member of the Association of South-East Asian nations.

Later this year, we will open a new mission to ASEAN headquarters in Jakarta, as we seek to strengthen our relationship with ASEAN after we leave the EU.

The global centre of economic gravity has been shifting eastwards towards Asia for decades – and this trend shows no sign of abating. In 1980, Asia comprised less than 20 percent of the world economy; today the figure has climbed to over a third.

In his new book 'The Future is Asian', Parag Khanna writes that of the \$30 trillion in extra middle class consumption expected by 2030, only \$1 trillion will come from the West. Power always follows money, so the rise of Asia will have a profound impact on the global balance.

Now Britain is already the biggest European investor in South East Asia, with ASEAN trade of nearly £37 billion, and over 4,000 British companies employing more than 50,000 people in Singapore alone.

And those connections are why Britain's post-Brexit role should be to act as an invisible chain linking together the democracies of the world, those countries which share our values and support our belief in free trade, the rule of law and open societies.

That doesn't mean being dogmatic or forcing our values on others. And of course we recognise that every country is different.

But it does mean speaking out for those fundamental principles to our friends, as well as those who set themselves up in opposition to them.

It means being active where we have special responsibilities, such as securing peace in Yemen.

And it means working with others where we can be most effective, such as with the French in Libya, NATO in Afghanistan and the United States and Australia in Asia.

That is why I was proud to announce in October the biggest expansion of Britain's diplomatic network for a generation, with another 335 overseas positions and 14 new Posts around the world and a doubling of the number of British diplomats who speak a foreign language in the country where they serve.

Those nations who share values are going to need to stand together to defend them.

And as happened after the Salisbury nerve agent attack, when 28 democracies came together and expelled 153 Russian spies that was the biggest coordinated expulsion in the history of diplomacy. And sent out a very powerful message.

But we also need to stand together as we reform the multilateral institutions whose noble purposes are all too often compromised by over-heavy bureaucracies and ineffective decision-making.

They were set up in the 20th century but they need to be fit for the 21st century – not least to make sure they operate fairly for the United States which is not just the largest and most powerful democracy but also, in nearly every case, their largest donor.

Conclusion

So to conclude, on 27th January 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar landed here – and the bicentenary of that event falls in just over three weeks.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong explained its significance in these words: "Had Raffles not landed, Singapore might not have become a unique spot in South East Asia, quite different from the islands in the archipelago around us, or the states in the Malayan Peninsula. But because of Raffles, Singapore became a British colony, a free port and a modern city."

The British legacy of the rule of law, clean administration, independent courts and the English language have all been part of Singapore's success.

The people of Singapore have built magnificently on that legacy and our relationship has developed to a point where our countries work side-by-side in almost every field.

Last year Prime Minister Lee attended the Commonwealth summit in London; trade between us rose by 7 percent to nearly £14 billion; and three Royal Navy ships visited Singapore.

As we renew our friendship with Singapore for the next two centuries, I'm delighted that on Friday, Foreign Minister Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and I will launch our new Partnership for the Future, focused on the digital economy, education, innovation, security and defence.

But as we cooperate in all these areas, let us also remember a higher purpose, namely our joint responsibility to modernise and safeguard an international order that has led to unparalleled peace and prosperity for

both our nations.

The United Kingdom will always be ready to work alongside likeminded countries – and few in Asia are more likeminded than Singapore.

So, as Lee Kuan Yew said, let us “seek a maximum number of friends” and “seize opportunities that come with changing circumstances”.

The scale of the challenge demands no less. Thank you very much.

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