

**Statement by Prime Minister H.E. *Dasho* Tshering Tobgay at
the Singapore Summit 2017
[16 September 2017]**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour to convey the warm greetings of His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck to the government and people of Singapore... especially to the numerous Singaporeans from all walks of life with whom His Majesty the King enjoys close personal friendships.

Being thoroughly intimidated (and quite awestruck) by all the entrepreneurial and intellectual giants at this Summit, I hasten to clarify that I am merely a public servant in a small developing country and that I am here as a friend and admirer of a smart and sophisticated Singapore. I deeply appreciate this opportunity to learn from this gathering of progressive innovators and visionaries.

While Bhutan and Singapore are both small countries with large neighbours, unlike Singapore, we do not have the resources to be a “small country that can punch above its weight.” Bhutan is constantly grappling with our *karma* - the “causes and conditions” - created by the presence of very large neighbours. And it is because of the threat perception of a small country with a strong sense of vulnerability that Bhutan has approached the process of development, modernization, and change with extreme caution.

Bhutan has been described as a small country with a large vision, a society that defines happiness as the goal for human development, and a country that has dared to be different against the pressures of globalization. I would also like to share my views on the dilemma of being a small country in a large world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The topics of discourse at this summit reminds me of His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck's advice to us:

“No nation today can stand alone in achievement. Time is slowly telling us that there can be no lasting individual success without success as a community and there cannot be lasting national progress and success if it does not fit into a future of global peace, harmony, and equality. The world must progress together or fail together.”

I believe that the Singapore Summit has delved into the core of the issues that are challenging the stability of human existence and development. They are sensitive and contemporary issues which are very relevant but are already having a significant impact on us.

It is critical that we navigate a new world order through an unpredictable regional and global political, social, and economic climate; that we define Asia's new role in keeping regions interconnected and interdependent; that we design policies to deal with inequalities that are excluding societies and leaving countries behind; that we tap the amazing power of technology; and that we strengthen social justice and harmony for all our peoples.

All this at a time when some large powers are self-absorbed and withdrawing from many areas of concern to the human community; when others are asserting themselves; and when yet others are trying to figure out their identities and roles. For example, the Hon'ble Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Teo Chee Hean, yesterday outlined a scenario where the US might withdraw further into itself and China assert itself in the region and beyond.

If I may offer some optimism from a Buddhist perspective, our spiritual masters would probably say that the current trend can be good because we are getting “the rug being pulled from under our feet.” It forces us to re-think a new world order. And any real and

lasting solution to global issues can only come through a universal wave of human empathy, desire, and passion for the common good.

I am reassured that this Summit included “The Future We Lead” because young leaders are, indeed, at the forefront in addressing challenging issues in their own societies and carry the mandate of the new world order. In Bhutan, too, the largest section of our population is the youth. And they are constantly reminded of their responsibility by our 37-year old King who has said, if I quote:

“I always tell our youth that it is important, in this day and age, to be well educated, tech savvy, and to have a good worldview, but it is also imperative that we understand that we are the custodians of our heritage. There is great wisdom and value in our cultural and spiritual upbringing which is an indivisible part of our identity. It is special. We must look after our Asian values and always be proud of it.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a developing country, Bhutan’s development focus includes the ambitious 2030 Agenda to advance sustainable development, to eradicate poverty and to leave no one behind. Fortunately, this resonates with our own development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, conveying a holistic approach to human development.

In fact we are relieved and happy to note that the world has reached a level of awareness where countries have come to appreciate that our very planet is threatened. This awareness reflects priorities and values for human development that our Monarchs have emphasized for more than a century.

As the Singapore Summit implies, for the 2030 Agenda to be truly transformative and universal, LDCs that remain the furthest behind must be at the centre of the international community’s attention and efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to reflect briefly on the relations between Singapore and Bhutan. In 1985 Time Magazine interviewed the fourth King of Bhutan His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Asked who His Majesty admired most among the world leaders, the immediate response was “Mr. Lee Kuan Yew”. His Majesty’s words have echoed through the decades and defined our relations.

Even before the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2002, Bhutan has greatly benefitted from the support we have received from the government and people of Singapore. Our cooperation has covered areas like human resource development, ICT, media and communications, transport, and technical and vocational education and training.

But our relations go far beyond development cooperation. We value Singapore’s support because we know Singapore takes principled positions on development funding and on issues on the global agenda. And we deeply appreciate the fact that Singapore has often given Bhutan priority over countries that are strategically more important from an economic or political perspective.

I would like to share another story that highlights the special connection between Singapore and Bhutan. His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck had met Mr. Lee Kuan Yew several times, both as the Crown Prince and as King. In 2011 His Majesty met Mr. Lee in Singapore. At the end of the meeting His Majesty asked Mr. Lee if he could give him a hug. After a little awkward hesitation, Mr. Lee said, “Why not?.” The 31-year old King hugged 87-year old Mr. Lee. It was with tears in her eyes that a senior Singapore official later told Bhutanese friends. “At first we were stunned by the King’s suggestion. And then... we Singaporeans have never ever experienced such a touching moment.”

So what next? We have reached a stage when we have growing relations at all levels. Many Bhutanese are getting addicted to laksa, bak kut teh, and chicken rice. And, at many of our sacred pilgrimage sites today, you are likely to see a number of Singaporeans struggling up the mountain tracks. We have certainly made a strong connection between the Sea and the Sky.

Putting aside the asymmetries of size, resources, and power, I believe that there is so much more that Bhutan can learn from Singapore. We deeply admire the culture of innovation and meritocracy, and discipline and hard work, that has brought Singapore to where you are today. Physically it may take an aircraft just a few minutes to fly across Singapore but that is mere geography. No one today doubts that Singapore is a global economic power and a miraculous development story.

Bhutan is a small country with a small economy - our GDP is barely 2.2 billion dollars. But with 72 % of our country under forest cover and a large part of our country protected as parks and wildlife sanctuaries, we have pledged to remain carbon-neutral for all time. Our rich culture is thriving and is the essence of the Bhutanese identity. In terms of social services, healthcare and education are provided free, and agriculture is heavily subsidized to encourage organic practices.

Our system of governance is a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy and, with democratic governance being a “Gift from the Throne”, we Bhutanese are making the transformation from being loyal subjects to becoming responsible citizens. I believe that real democracy is far more possible in a small state than in a large one.

All this is inspired by our development philosophy of Gross National Happiness - a higher goal for human development that highlights a balanced, sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development far beyond the conventional measure of GDP.

This summit is an appropriate venue to clarify the misconception that GNH does not undermines the importance of economic wellbeing. It does not. In fact, while GNH has largely focused on the sphere of public policy, we are now integrating GNH values into the decision-making processes of businesses. In November this year, at a “GNH For Business” conference, we will launch a *GNH Certification Tool for Business*.

As His Excellency Mr Teo said yesterday, taking care of our workers will uplift our economy. So, using GNH indicators, this process will measure the commitment of business firms to behave ethically and contribute to the happiness of the workers as well as that of their customers, community and society. All this while also contributing to the sustainability of the natural environment. Business companies that qualify, will be awarded the GNH Certification as an incentive which will also serve as a powerful brand that carries the impact of GNH.

Where is, then, the meeting point between the philosophy of Gross National Happiness and Singapore’s approach to create a strong integrated society with its institutions of governance built on pragmatic wisdom?

Yesterday, Mr Teo Chee Hean explained Singapore’s pragmatic policy of getting along with all countries, big and small. He also mentioned the advantages that small countries have. I too believe that, in a world in which the great powers are abandoning creative leadership, we must come together in the strength of small societies and collectively build a voice above our individual capacities. Our small intimate societies provide greater opportunities for popular participation in policy making. We have greater community self-awareness. And we are able to nourish the values that are becoming increasingly scarce in large societies.

Singapore is a model for small states that must learn to assert their interests. I, therefore, thank and congratulate you for organising this

timely and relevant discourse.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank Temasek Chairman Mr. Lim Boon Heng and Temasek Holdings for the kind invitation and warm hospitality and for giving me the opportunity to include a small voice in a world that is too often a cacophony of incoherent views.

Tashi Delek!