

His Excellency Dr Tandi Dorji, Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Kingdom of Bhutan,

His Excellency Achim Steiner, Administrator, United Nations Development Programme,

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

1 Let me begin by first conveying my appreciation to the Royal Government of Bhutan for your warm hospitality and arrangements for the 14th Round Table Meeting (RTM). As with previous RTMs, the briefings and presentations have painted a clear overview of Bhutan's economic, social, and environmental situation. These in turn offer useful insights into the country's opportunities and challenges. This RTM, coinciding with the start of Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan, takes place at a particularly important juncture. As many have pointed out over the past two days, it marks the last mile before Bhutan graduates as an LDC in 2023.

2 Whenever I visit Bhutan, I am reminded of the stark differences between our two countries – one a tropical island at the tip of peninsula Southeast Asia, and the other an idyllic Kingdom nestled high in the Himalayas. Scratch beyond the surface, however: we see many similarities in our national circumstances that make Singapore and Bhutan natural partners. As small states, we share many similar concerns. Both countries have had to work to make the

most of our limited natural resources and small populations. These realities will not change.

3 The similarities in our predicaments and outlooks have contributed to the warm and growing friendship between our countries. Our leaders and senior officials interact regularly, both formally as well as informally. In May 2017 Dr Vivian Balakrishnan became the first Singapore Foreign Minister to make an Official Visit to Bhutan. We look forward to increased exchanges between the two countries. People-to-people links are also growing. Since Druk Air commenced direct flights from Bhutan to Singapore in 2012, more Singaporeans have been visiting this beautiful land of the Thunder Dragon. I am told that inbound arrivals from Singapore grew almost 37% from 2016 to 2017.

4 In the earlier years of our development, and in fact even today, we have benefitted from the experience of other countries. We have done some things right, and some things not so right. Just as we learn from others, we are more than happy to share our experiences in our journey with others - both the good and the bad. The primary vehicle through which we do so is the Singapore Cooperation Programme, or SCP. We are glad that SCP is one of the main areas of our cooperation with Bhutan: About 1,100 Bhutanese officials have participated in programmes in fields such as finance, public administration, and economic development. Working closely with Bhutan, we have also collaborated on customised programmes in areas such as banking, legal frameworks, and healthcare. Beyond the SCP, our anti-corruption agencies and libraries have also done work together.

5 Looking ahead, we understand that skills training remains a key priority for Bhutan. In particular, there is a need to ensure that Bhutanese youths are provided up-to-date training in relevant fields that can be applied both in and

out of the country. To this end, Singapore’s ITE Education Services and Bhutan’s Ministry of Labour and Human Resources are working together on a TVET project, that would hopefully contribute in some small way to Bhutan’s skilling needs.

6 Beyond government collaboration, there are many other organic linkages that have sprouted up over the years. For example, since 2013 Smile Asia – an NGO specialising in treating cleft lip and palate as well as other facial deformities - has been coming often to Bhutan. In fact, a delegation from Smile Asia was in Punakha just last month. Singapore Polytechnic is working closely with the Royal Civil Service Commission on public sector innovation. SingHealth collaborates with Bhutanese healthcare professionals in areas such as Emergency Medicine and palliative care, including ENT Doctors clinical attachments in Singapore. As our people-to-people links deepen, it is my hope that such initiatives grow as well.

7 Many of the areas of collaboration I have outlined above have been going on for several years, and we look forward to working with the Bhutanese government in the days ahead to explore new areas of potential cooperation. Singapore-Bhutan ties have strengthened over the years, and I am confident that our relationship will continue on this upward trajectory.

8 Thank you.

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