MrSPEECH BY MRS JOSEPHINE TEO, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, AT CAIXIN'S ASIA NEW VISION FORUM 2023 ON 13 JUNE 2023, 9.00 AM

SINGAPORE'S APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGIES IN MAINTAINING THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN ACCELERATING INNOVATION AND PREVENTING HARMS

Ms Hu Shuli (胡舒立), Chairperson, Caixin Global,

Distinguished Guests

Colleagues and friends,

Introduction

1.   Good morning and thank you for inviting me.

2.   I would like to congratulate Caixin on the success of your inaugural Asia New Vision Forum, and welcome everyone here today to be part of the deepening global conversations on what it will take for all of us to succeed in the digital era.

3.   This conference could not have been held at a better time. Developments in digital technologies are capturing imaginations worldwide. All governments want our countries to benefit from the new opportunities. But we must also acknowledge the possible disruptions to industries and labour markets that these technologies may bring, as well as the impact on societies.

4.   How do we find the right balance between accelerating innovation and preventing harms to society? It is one of the defining challenges in governance today.

5.   I will share more about Singapore's approach when investing in digital infrastructure. At the same time, I will outline our preliminary ideas on dealing with AI. Perhaps the most important area of all is how we need to strengthen international partnerships. I will present some areas that Singapore hopes to see progress in.

Singapore's future-focused investments

6.   The question of balanced development was discussed many times last week during our annual Asia Tech x Singapore event. More than 10,000 representatives from government, industry and civil society took part both in person and virtually.

7.   Even as we debated the risks and implications for governance, there was clear consensus on at least one point. Most countries are far from reaching the full potential of the digital economy, certainly not in Asia.

a.   In Southeast Asia alone, we expect the digital economy to increase fivefold to US$1 trillion by 2030[1], driven by new internet users and a rising middle class.

b.   There is still room to strengthen our digital infrastructure to enable future growth. Many countries will continue to invest in them.

8.   Likewise in Singapore, we launched our Digital Connectivity Blueprint, to ensure that digital infrastructure remains future-ready.

a.   Within the next 5 years, we will upgrade our broadband network to support 10-gigabit speeds and provide seamless end-to-end connectivity.

b.   Within the next 10 years, we aim to double our capacity for submarine cable landings.

9.   Such infrastructure will make Singapore better connected to the world. It will also allow us to ride the wave of emerging technologies, including AI, autonomous systems, immersive interactivity, and quantum computing.

10.   But even when building up infrastructure, we must be concerned about sustainability. For example, our data centres must become greener, either in terms of their energy sources or operations.

11.   Green data centres will take time to be developed. Meanwhile, we can still try and save energy.

a.   One way is if tropical data centres could run at higher temperatures.

b.   Cooling systems account for about 40% of a data centre's total energy consumption, and our tropical climate is an added challenge.

c.   It therefore makes sense to introduce a new standard for the operation of data centres in tropical climates, to drive energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions in the data centre sector.

d.   The standard, which is a world-first, will not just benefit Singapore but all our neighbours that host data centres.

12.   Significant resources will be required to bring the plans in the Blueprint to fruition. Two big-ticket items alone – submarine cables and data centres – are expected to catalyse around 20 billion Singapore dollars in investments. This consists of:

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[1] E-Conomy SEA Report 2021, Google, Temasek and Bain & Company.

a.   At least 10 billion in overall submarine cable investments that will strengthen digital connectivity between Singapore, Southeast Asia and the rest of the world.

b.   And potentially 10-12 billion in building new green data centres.

c.   Most of the investments will be led by the private sector, over the next decade.

13.   I have taken some time to share the key features of the Blueprint because it is one example of how we approach Digital Governance.

a.   We see it as a matter of good governance to lay out long-term plans and the investments needed, which can be reviewed from time to time as circumstances evolve.

b.   We also highlight concerns such as with sustainability, and how we intend to address them.

c.   This will provide better assurance to our people and enterprises that their interests are being safeguarded and encourage them to participate in digital with greater confidence.

Approach to AI governance

14.   Another major issue in Digital Governance has to do with AI.

15.   In recent months, stunning examples of generative AI have taken the world by storm. They show how AI can power significant advancements in productivity and innovation at low costs.

16.   Yet there are real concerns about the misuse and overuse of AI. Many workers genuinely worry that they may be replaced by machines. Stolen identities, misinformation, disinformation, and biased algorithms can threaten to severely undermine the fabric of our societies.

17.   Even before generative AI became popularised, Singapore has progressively built-up new safeguards for the digital era. Our data protection law dates back to 2012. We introduced laws and regulations to guard against online falsehoods and harmful content. We spare no effort in helping our workers adapt to new jobs and skills, as well as help their companies digitally transform.

18.   With AI, we expect the effects to be even more far-reaching. Our laws and support to citizens will need to be updated.

19.   At the same time, we believe we must do all we can to harness AI for the Public Good. This means using AI in areas like managing public facilities, preventing crime, healthcare and education. Ensuring citizen benefits is core to Singapore's approach

to AI. We aim to steer AI developments towards beneficial uses, while promoting trust and accountability.

20.   How do we plan to do this?

    a.   First, we believe the government can lead the way in widespread AI experimentation and scaling. One could even argue that the government is uniquely positioned to have oversight on both the scale of problems, and the resources to make such experimentation impactful.

    b.   Second, we believe AI proficiency can be built through a combination of deep skills development as well as ground-up learning. These are important foundations, akin to enriching soil conditions to allow a thousand flowers to bloom.

    c.   Third, we believe in responsible AI deployment. We will encourage experimentation and adoption. But we will also strive to shield society from the most serious AI risks.

21.   To make progress on all that I just mentioned, the government cannot do it alone. The private sector and the research ecosystem have rich expertise. They *can* and must be encouraged to participate meaningfully to advance AI for the Public Good.

22.   In the age of AI, governance will continue to be challenged. Here, we draw comfort from the wisdom embodied in the Chinese expression "摸着石头过河". We do not have all the answers to challenges that will surely arise, but we can, through careful observation and navigation, reach our destination safely and intact as a society.

Strengthening international partnerships

23.   Beyond the investments and progressive policies that we are introducing in Singapore, international partnerships are equally vital in realising the full benefits of the digital era.

24.   We hope to see a global digital economy that can drive sustained growth and prosperity, for and the benefit of all nations. To achieve this, we are working closely with partners – big and small - from all over the world to promote a digital economy that is more interconnected, trusted, and inclusive.

    a.   On this note, I understand that yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat in his keynote address at Caixin also spoke about the importance of upholding an open, inclusive, and rules-based framework to enhance trade;

    b.   And that all countries must work together to address these common challenges.

<u>Singapore's collaboration with China</u>

25.   And certainly, for Singapore and China, there is significant potential for us to harness digital developments to enhance our inter-connectivity, to benefit our businesses and citizens. The strong commitment from our leaders over the years has laid a good foundation for us to deepen collaboration in forward-looking areas.

26.   I am fortunate to have personally been involved in the three Government to Government projects between Singapore and China – the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park, the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-city, and the China-Singapore Chongqing Connectivity Initiative.

      a.   This year, we commemorate the 15th anniversary of the Tianjin Eco-city.

      b.   Next year, we look forward to the 30th anniversary of the Suzhou Industrial Park.

27.   At every stage of Singapore's and China's development, our bilateral relationship has been updated to reflect new opportunities, and to strengthen cooperation in new fields.

      a.   Earlier in March this year, Prime Minister Lee and President Xi agreed to upgrade our bilateral relationship to an "All-Round High-Quality Future-Oriented Partnership". During the meeting between our leaders, they reaffirmed our commitment to continually expand bilateral cooperation, and pursue new collaboration in areas such as digital and green economies.

      b.   In May, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong visited China and met with Premier Li Qiang. Digitalisation and sustainability were also raised as areas of mutual interest, amongst others, where we can deepen collaboration.

28.   Indeed, Singapore and China share similar aspirations and challenges in leveraging digital transformation to create better opportunities for our people and our businesses.

      a.   In Singapore, our Smart Nation initiative seeks not only to develop a vibrant digital economy but also a secure, inclusive and stable digital society, supported by a progressive digital government.

      b.   Similarly, China has established a comprehensive national-level plan to construct a "Digital China", that spans the digital economy, governance, inclusion, and sustainability.

29.   This is an area where we can learn from each other's experiences. Such exchanges will also build on the good digital cooperation we are developing through various bilateral platforms.

a. In the Chongqing Connectivity Initiative, ICT is one of the four key pillars of cooperation.

b. In the Singapore-Shenzhen Smart City Initiative, 29 priority projects have been launched in 9 areas, such as digital trade facilitation, digital sustainability, and digital identity.

c. In April this year, our Infocomm Media Development Authority signed an MOU with their Shanghai counterparts to strengthen collaboration on key areas such as digital connectivity, digital utilities and innovation.

Multilateral and plurilateral partnerships

30.   Beyond our bilateral collaborations, Singapore will also continue to forge strong multilateral partnerships for the benefit of our people and businesses.

a. Singapore has advanced digital cooperation through mechanisms such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, as well as the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement, for which we welcome China's membership application.

b. There are different members in these multilateral groups, but collectively they form a strong base of interlocking partnerships. This builds a good foundation for a consistent and resilient approach to governance on cross-border digital issues.

31.   There are three areas in particular where closer cooperation is important.

a. First, we hope to strengthen cross-border data flows. This will ensure that key digital transactions can be conducted seamlessly and securely across the world, driving efficiency and supporting innovation.

b. Second, we hope to enhance digital trade facilitation. We should work towards digitalising trade and having interoperable standards. Because when rules are different across different regimes, it increases cost for the companies, it raises their administrative burden and it stands in the way of further trade growth. Singapore's TradeTrust framework can help with the trusted exchange of electronic trade documents and reduce cost for businesses.

c. Third, we hope more countries come together to develop a balanced and progressive approach towards AI Governance, to maximise our ability to use AI for the Public Good across borders.

32.   In fact, within ASEAN, member states have already embarked on regional collaboration in some areas.

a. For example, we developed the ASEAN Data Management Framework, as well as practical data transfer mechanisms such as the ASEAN Model Contractual Clauses, to help businesses put in place proper safeguards to protect data and also reduce the amount of resources spent on negotiation and compliance. As a next step, we aim to achieve inter-operability with the EU.

b. Next January, Singapore will Chair the 4th ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting. Under our Chairmanship, we plan to pursue even closer convergence and inter-operability in areas like AI Governance, cross-border data flows and cybersecurity.

c. We also look forward to working with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners in building a sustainable digital future that is open, inclusive, and secure for our ASEAN community.

Conclusion

33. The digital domain presents us with endless possibilities, but it also demands a holistic and collaborative governance approach, both domestically and internationally.

34. Singapore remains committed to embracing technology responsibly, ensuring inclusive growth and fostering collaboration with our friends around the world.

35. We can and must join hands in harnessing the transformative power of the digital era to create better opportunities for everyone.

36. Thank you.

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