

# Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER (FOREIGN AFFAIRS) TO THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST CLUB AT LECTURE THEATRE NO. 11, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE ON MONDAY, 21 DECEMBER 1981 AT 5.30 PM

I take it that your decision to invite me to talk on Soviet policy towards Asia was a carefully considered one. I mention this because there is a school of thought which believes that the appropriate foreign policy posture for a small state like Singapore is to walk on all fours and with the body no higher than half an inch from the ground.

This is called the low profile approach to foreign policy. Admittedly it is not an elegant or a dignified approach to anything but its advocates would justify it by saying: "What the hell, man. Better a live worm than a dead merlion."

One of the cardinal rules of the low profile school of thought is that a small state like Singapore should not publicly discuss the foreign policy of countries bigger and more powerful than itself -- which means practically every country in the world. Even where we Singaporeans disagree with them and are convinced that their actions are not in Singapore's interests, the low profile advocates think the proper response is a disarming silence augmented by strenuous genuflections in the presence of powerful adversaries.

These together with recourse to worry beads will presumably spare small mammals like Singapore from the predatory attentions of larger mammals. That is why Singapore's high profile posture on such issues as Kampuchea and Afghanistan has been branded as usurpation of behaviour more becoming to countries bigger and more powerful. Like the sheep in Orwell's famous satire our low profilers bleat: "Four legs good, two legs bad."

But this government has used as its foreign policy guide the slogan towards the end of Orwell's novel and one which I believe the sheep should have adopted right from the start.

It goes: "Four legs good, but two legs better."

This is why I began this address by asking whether your invitation to talk on Soviet policy in Asia was a considered one. By every conceivable criteria the Soviet Union is a large mammal -- the largest there is. Singapore by comparison is not more than a mote in that mammal's eye.

By way of assurance let me tell our low profilers that the Soviet Union will not take the slightest notice of what I have said today on Soviet policy. At the most it will be glanced through by whoever is in charge of the South-East Asian desk in Moscow and filed away for action if and when the Soviets get the opportunity to sort out the black sheep from the red goats in Singapore.

But as of now what Singapore says, I can assure you, is of no great consequence to the Soviets. Were these sentiments to come from say President Reagan or from Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaopang, then there would indeed be strong Soviet reactions. Such speeches would certainly be brought to the attention of President Brezhnev himself.

But speeches about the Soviet Union from leaders of small countries are just so much data to be filed away and to be used in the shaping of its overall Asia policy and global strategy.

This is why I think it is the low profilers who have an exaggerated view of the impact Singapore foreign policy statements can make on a country like the Soviet Union. Soviet policy towards Asia and South-East Asia is not at all affected by whether Singapore adopts a low profile or high profile on foreign policy. As with any other great power the only question of relevance to the Soviet Union about Singapore would be: "Can it be a useful pawn in the great power game?" If it is pro-Soviet then it would be used immediately to advance the Soviet power game, as I believe the Vietnamese are being used today. Being pro-Soviet has so far not brought great joy to the Vietnamese people.

If it is neutral then at least the Soviets would know that Singapore would not be an obstacle.

But if Singapore is critical of Soviet policy then, at worst, it would be a minor nuisance. The Soviets know that by itself Singapore cannot determine the final outcome of the vast and complex power game the Soviets are playing today in Asia. As far as the Soviets are concerned the views of a small country can at the most be useful and if not useful irrelevant.

So Singapore is taking a high profile over Kampuchea and Afghanistan not because it believes that it can bring about a change in Soviet Asian policy but out of an awareness of its helplessness before Soviet power.

It is the low profilers who have an exaggerated view of Singapore's capacity to influence Soviet policy. They think that if they can simulate meekness, humility and submissiveness the Soviets could be persuaded to leave Singapore and South-East Asia alone. Even an indifferent student of history will tell you the meek far from inheriting anything have invariably disappeared from the earth.

I concede that were God to take over the direction of human history things may be different. But until then it is safer to work on the assumption that the meek are meant to be trampled under.

Only a high profile in foreign policy offers small nations the possibility of bringing influence to bear on great and powerful nations. By articulating their fears openly and loudly and making known their perception of Soviet intentions the small nations can make clear that they intend to seek salvation through collective effort. The collective voice and action of small nations can have impact on the policy of a great power. It will at least know that the small nations are not confused about the intentions of a great power - that its victims are united and on the alert.

Most of Asia is still overwhelmingly non-Communist. So is South-East Asia. They also happen to be among the wealthier and more developed portions of Asia. There is an added bonus too. By one of those ironic

twists of history the most populous nation in Asia - Communist China - also happens to be the most anti-Soviet of nations. Soviet actions in Afghanistan and through its Vietnamese proxy in Kampuchea have alerted the majority of Asian nations, as evidenced by repeated voting in the United Nations, that Asia is once again the battleground for imperial glories.

When Western Imperialism first made its appearance in Asia, its peoples were too scattered and too ignorant of the nature of Western imperialism to resist it in time. By the time they woke up it was too late. It took them some 300 years of protracted struggle to overthrow the yoke of empire.

It is my contention that Soviet foreign policy is not, as is generally believed, the spread of a Communist World Revolution in accordance with the doctrines of Marx. It is not Marxism but old fashioned imperialism which provides the motive power for Soviet foreign policy today. The ultimate aim is to make the Soviet Union the dominant imperial power in the world. The springboard for the realisation of this dream must be an Asia dominated by the Soviet Union and with access to the two great oceans which lap the shores of South, South-East and East Asia. Soviet reach in Asia is greater than that of Western Europe or of the United States simply because geographically the Soviet Union is a part of Asia while the Western nations are not. Very few Europeans and Americans, however global they may be in their thinking, the Soviets believe, would seriously challenge a Soviet take over of Asia. The Western mood may change should Asian resistance to Soviet imperial expansion acquire credible proportions. But as of now Asia has a low priority in the foreign policy calculations of the West. The Soviets must have taken note of the fact that their actions in Afghanistan and Kampuchea have so far produced nothing more threatening than ritual moral condemnation -- and I can think of no single instance in history where moral condemnation defeated aggression.

If a new imperialism is to be thwarted in Asia it must be done largely by the Asians themselves -- by Asian cohesion and Asian determination to see that they do not, after a brief interlude of independence, once more become the subjects of a new empire. If what is happening in

Poland and Afghanistan are anything to go by, it may take Asians far more than three centuries to cast off the yoke should they ever come under the embrace of the emerging Soviet Empire. A Soviet Empire may turn out to be a black hole. Anything that is sucked into it disappears forever.

Now many people may find it difficult to accept the concept of a Soviet imperialism. We have been conditioned by Marxist ideology to believe that imperialism is a purely capitalist manifestation and that imperialism in any shape or form is abhorrent to communists. The Soviets will point to their fervent and consistent championing of anti-imperialist struggles as proof.

This is absolutely true but only in so far as it relates to Western imperialism. For their part the Soviet never liquidated the vast Tsarist Empire they inherited. Not one square inch of that empire was decolonised. On the contrary since 1939 the Soviets have added more territories to what they inherited from the imperial Tsars.

On the other hand, the Western imperial powers -- Britain, France, the United States, the Dutch, Belgians, the Italians, the Spaniards and the Portuguese -- have liquidated their empires. Evidence of this is that more than half the membership of the United Nations consists of former colonies and protectorates of Western powers. If deeds are proof then the Western nations have shown themselves to be dedicated anti-imperialists.

In theory it may well be true that Marxism and imperialism are incompatible terms. But it is my contention that Soviet foreign policy today is not shaped by a Marxist tradition but the pre-revolutionary Tsarist imperial tradition. Sixty-four years after the revolution the ideals of Marxism have been superseded by the ideals of Russian nationalism -- and imperialism is essentially nothing more than aggressive nationalism.

All that the Soviet leaders have done is to clothe the Russian imperialist tradition with Marxist garments. When Soviet leaders talk of a communist world revolution they always make it a point to stress that it must be under Soviet leadership and no other. The Sino-Soviet dispute was not so much over obscure doctrinal points of Marxist theology

but over Chinese refusal to be a junior partner in the struggle to establish a Russian world empire.

Mr Deng Xiaoping summed it all up in May last year when he said: "The Soviet Union is not a socialist country but a socialist-imperialist country."

Similarly the Yugoslavs, the Albanians and now the Italian and Spanish Communist parties have repudiated any subordination to Soviet leadership because they recognise the imperialist assertions behind the rhetoric about World Communism.

The point I want to stress is that Russia, both Tsarist and Soviet, has been in a state of more or less continuous territorial expansion -- and mostly in the direction of Asia. The process began under Ivan I in the 14th century and has continued with brief interruptions. According to the Norwegian writer, Fridtjof Nansen, Russia has, since 1500 and up to the outbreak of World War Two, added as much territory to its empire every seven years as that occupied by Norway. Russia did not become an Asian country until about the 17th century when Soviet Asia was legally declared an area for Russian colonisation.

Many Russian writers wrote as eloquently as Kipling about Russia's great imperial destiny. Gogol, for example, saw great significance in the fact that Russia covered half the world. Puskin wrote a militaristic poem in praise of Russia's suppression of the Polish uprising of 1831 and of the capture of Warsaw. Dostoyevsky yearned for the capture of Constantinople.

And a 19th century philosopher, Peter Chandayev warned his countrymen:

"If we don't stretch from the Bering Straits to the Oder no-one would take notice of us."

When this was written Russia covered one-sixth of the world's surface and could accommodate within it more than two United States, 40 Frances and 92 Britains.

For a people who can believe that Russia is of a size too insignificant to attract attention the globe itself may be no more than an oyster shell.

Perhaps a French observer, the Marquis de Custine, was struck by this kind of Russian claustrophobia when he wrote thus in 1839:

"Today the Russian people are incapable of anything except conquering the world."

To be fair to the Russians they were only mirroring the messianic dreams of empire which then pervaded the whole of Europe, in particular Western Europe. Western capitalism felt the urge to carve out great empires to get raw materials to feed its multiplying industries and find markets for their output.

Backward Tsarist Russia came too late in the scramble for empire. But now that the Western powers have opted out of the imperialist business and have discovered other more efficient and less troublesome ways, of making money out of the Third World, the Soviets have unwisely gone into this risky business.

May be in the early days of the revolution, the Soviets believed that the superiority of the Communist system, economically, politically and culturally, over the capitalist system could be demonstrated by its achievements. It has been a great disappointment to everyone. Not even so gifted a people as the Russians can tame the Communist system.

After 64 years only a handful of countries outside the Soviet Union have freely opted for the Communist model -- and they invariably are poor impoverished states whose only major achievement so far have been their intensive militarisation through second and third generation surplus Soviet weapons.

The biggest blow of all was the decision of post-Mao Communist China to seek rapid modernisation by plugging into the non-Communist economic grid.

The economic, cultural and political attractions of Soviet Communism have on the whole been minimal. After 64 years the largest

country in the world has to feed itself by import of capitalist grain.

Where the Soviet Union has excelled is in the acquisition of military power. Militarily it is undoubtedly a super-power and therefore the only way it can realise a Communist World Order under Soviet leadership is by the deployment of military power which it has accumulated by sacrificing everything else.

But I believe that in this day and age the course of empire can never be smooth and that the journey must end in the collapse of the empire. It has happened without exception to all empires -- those of nomadic conquerors, of feudal chiefs, of megalomaniac emperors, religious messiahs and capitalist adventurers.

This must be so unless of course the potential victims of imperialism are in some Orwellian fashion persuaded that though Western imperialism is oppression, socialist imperialism is liberation.

Both Afghanistan and Kampuchea are indications that no one has been persuaded that imperialism is liberation.

In Poland, as earlier in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, students of imperialism would have no difficulty in discerning the makings of the kind of anti-colonial revolts that eventually led to the crack up of empires.

All in all this has been a very high profile commentary on Soviet policy. This has been so because it is directed, for what it is worth, to non-Communist friends. Though my speech is anti-Soviet in tone it is not so in intention. My criticisms of the Soviets have always been tempered by sincere regrets that I have to disagree with them and fear them. They are a very gifted people and they possess intellectual and character qualities which I sometimes wish we and our friends would assimilate.

The day that the Soviet leaders announce publicly that they have at last abandoned their goal of a Soviet led, financed and militarily aided Communist world revolution, then on that day the Singapore merlion could safely and happily gambol with the Soviet bear.

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