

Transcript of an interview with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew by David Cox of
London Weekend Television, recorded in Kingston, Jamaica, in May 1975.

Question : Mr. Lee, what do you think of the 'domino' theory?

Prime Minister : Well, I don't play dominoes. A group of bright Americans built up this theory when the United States wanted to intervene in Vietnam. And a group of brighter Americans debunked the theory when they decided they didn't want to be in Vietnam. And being a malleable mind, I believed the first one. Now I believe the second one.

Question : Nonetheless, do you think that the success of the
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Khmer Rouge and the Vietcong is going to have some
influence on insurgents elsewhere in Southeast Asia?

Prime Minister : The actual extent and the manner in which it will flow over into the other states of Southeast Asia will have to depend on the kind of relationships we can reach or strike with the communist countries of Indochina, and I think more important with the People's Republic of China. You know the technique is never for armies to invade, foreign armies to cross national territories and take over the country, but to pass over arms, instruction manuals and if that is not understood, then perhaps a few instructors to help. And so it is a slow process and it will take several years to see how it actually begins to affect Thailand and then, if things go wrong there, which may not be the case because the Thais are extremely shrewd, astute people who will now want to seek diplomatic and political solution. If they achieve that on terms which do not jeopardise the other countries of Southeast Asia, then Malaysia and Singapore will be havens of relative tranquillity.

Question : You told the Heads of Government here that the arms which the communists have gained control of in South Vietnam could prove a source of incalculable mischief. What exactly did you mean by that?

Prime Minister : Well, the South Vietnamese had 1,100,000 men under arms. The Khmer Rouge were given weapons for some 150,000 to 250,000 men, many of them just phantom names on pay-rolls. I don't believe the new governments in South Vietnam or Cambodia require these arms. They already got a lot of them. And they don't require the kind of large armies they had to take over these places. So it either goes into a Ploughshare programme, which I somehow find difficult to believe to be true, or is given to like-minded people or it is sold to boost the treasury in order to pay for the reconstruction of Vietnam, South Vietnam and Cambodia.

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Question : But how do you think these arms might change the future of other countries in Southeast Asia?

Prime Minister : I think you must be singularly lacking in imagination this morning. You ought to read some of ...

Question : But you tell me how your imagination suggests it is going to be used.

Prime Minister : Well, read Felix Green on the “Ugly American” and what happened with the weapons there and so on. If things go wrong, if social, economic, political conditions get sour, and there are these weapons, well, you use them.

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Question : Okay. Something else you said in your speech to the Heads of Governments, if I could just quote, was that “provided the rest of Southeast Asia understands the priorities to eradicate inequalities and reduce social

injustice and one or two other things it can escape insurgency and a new social order.” I would like to ask you how confident you are that the other Southeast Asian countries do understand that that is the priority?

Prime Minister : I believe they all understand that these are the priorities. If there is one lesson to be learned from the experience of Vietnam and Cambodia, it is that if you can dry up your swamp lands where people fester, mosquitoes breed, squalor, filth, poverty-odious in comparison to the life styles of the ruling elite and therefore generating bitterness, hatred enough to make people want to die, large numbers of them -- if you give them decent homes, decent jobs and so on I think that's all understood. The problem is: has the governments or the elites in these countries, in all these countries the political wisdom to know that time is running out and that there must be a fairer distribution

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of wealth and opportunity, there must be less social injustice.

Question : But if these governments are going to be able to eradicate the inequalities which you believe have to be eradicated, are they not going to have a problem with satisfying strong vested interests in those countries which don't want to see ...

Prime Minister : Well, strong vested interests don't take to guerilla insurgency, and I think they will have to be dealt with by perhaps government bonds repayable in 20, 30 years at IMF rates of interests or World Bank rates of interests to poor developing countries. That may be one way out.

Question : There is another problem though, isn't there, in that if many of these countries are facing insurgency as they are trying to carry out programmes of redistributing wealth and that sort of thing, they are

going to have to take counter - insurgency measures
even if they don't particularly ...

Prime Minister : Absolutely.

Question : You yourself have had to put a 100 communists in jail
last year.

Prime Minister : No, no, let's not exaggerate -- I have only got 20 plus.

Question : Okay, you got 20 communists in jail.

Prime Minister : It is not okay; it is very sad because for every person
that's put in, I antagonise his whole family, all his
friends, and it is not okay. It is something that's done
with great reluctance because the other chap just
refuses to give up armed struggle.

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Question : Well, quite, it is not okay. And if you do have to take counter-insurgency measures, then surely this is something which is likely to exacerbate tensions in the countries, it is likely to increase sympathy with guerillas, is it not?

Prime Minister : Well, it has got to be used judiciously. You've got to counter the terrorist before he becomes a liberation fighter, and to do that you must be extremely careful in not indiscriminately knocking down innocent persons whilst going for the terrorists. My Lai, for instance, and Lt. Calley is a classic example of how you antagonise a whole district, and perhaps many districts around that village.

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Question : But as we, in Britain, find in Northern Ireland, it is very hard to take any sort of successful counter-insurgency measures at all, which doesn't increase the support of the people you are trying to control.

Prime Minister : No, I think that is a different situation. Northern Ireland is a very special case going back to all your ancient feuds. I was talking to an Irish friend of mine, who now settles ... and who has been out in Singapore and Malaysia, and he explained to me how wicked the British were in passing these acts and dispossessing the Irish of land and so on and giving it to soldiers of the English, how it was all unjust and it is a great pity it can't be resolved in a peaceful way. And I asked, "What's the peaceful way?" He says, "Well, the thing to do is to give the land back." So that is slightly different.

Question : I like to turn now to external questions and ask you how the collapse of first British and then American power in your region has changed the way you conduct Singapore's foreign relations?

Prime Minister : Well, I wouldn't like to use the word 'collapse'. First of all, it was an orderly, if somewhat hasty, British withdrawal towards the end. And secondly, the Americans have not collapsed as a military power. They are still the world's most powerful nation with the most powerful fleet in the Pacific and in the Indian Ocean as of now. What has been shaken is the will to use it and perhaps the judgement to know when to say, "Please don't." That I think is affected, I hope temporarily.

Question : So you still rely on the American military strength to defend Singapore ... ?

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Prime Minister : No, not at all. I mean, it is utterly mad for anybody to believe that any American soldier will fight in any Asian country a guerilla war like Vietnam. That's finished. But an American naval presence to balance a Russian naval presence will help to act as a

counterweight to the People's Republic of China's weight on the rest of Southeast Asia, her capacity to make things pleasant and comfortable or less pleasant and more uncomfortable for these countries by multifarious ways of non-interference. But in each of these countries there are insurgency movements. And you can either step up aid as was done from time to time in Vietnam and Cambodia or you can cut down supplies and lower the level of terror and terrorism. So within these parameters we've got to find an easy kind of relationship. Let's put it very simply. In 20 to 30 years -- not in my effective life-time, political life-time -- if things go on as they are and there is no war between Soviet Union and China, People's Republic of China and the USA, then the People's Republic of China will be the most dominant force in Asia, and Southeast Asia is to her what the Caribbean is to America or Eastern Europe is to the USSR. And we would like to have the kind of relationship with the PRC more like what the Caribbean and Mexico and Venezuela and so on

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have with America than the East European States have in Comecon and the Warsaw Pact.

Question : You have perhaps been rather less enthusiastic than say , Tun Razak of Malaysia, over the last few years to go and forge new links with China. Why is that?

Prime Minister : I don't think that is necessarily true. I think we are in a very special situation. We are more than 75% ethnic Chinese. When my colleague, Mr. Rajaratnam, who is in charge of foreign affairs, went to Peking four weeks ago, he was accompanied by four of our colleagues, none of whom needed an interpreter. And they could have spoken Mandarin which is the official language

or the local patois of the various districts and we could find someone who could speak their language.

And therefore this gives rise to misunderstandings as to ... You know, when you see two people talking and you don't understand what they are talking about and you say, "What's he saying?" And I think we like to

have all our other neighbours, particularly Indonesia, satisfied that they want to establish diplomatic relations with China before we do so. But in any case, we've always had, which Malaysia never had -- the Bank of China, the Bank of Kwantung, three insurance companies owned by the People's Republic of China in Singapore operating all these years. So it's a very special relationship and as they told my colleagues when they were in Peking four weeks ago -

- five now -- "We are after all kinsmen." We are different like the New Zealanders and the Australians are different from the British. Well, I think I am very intrigued by that word 'kinsmen' because it implies a special empathy, and I have no ideological empathy.

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Therefore, I hope the empathy will be in some other field like economic development or comparing notes on how we could help each other's economies. And they are so big. All they got to do is to buy say half a dozen oil rigs every six months and they will keep all our shipyards busy.

Question : How much hope are you pinning on ASEAN as a means of bringing about the sort of Southeast Asia that you want to see?

Prime Minister : One doesn't pin hopes, I mean, if I may be forgiven for correcting your phrases. I think it gives people the wrong impression. This is the first grouping of Southeast Asian countries which has taken root because it was an indigenous initiative and it has been given impetus by the logic of what has happened -- lessening of American dominance, the withdrawal of the British from Southeast Asia and the necessity if we are to survive and to be able to plug into say, the technologies of Western Europe or America or Japan and not like the Comecon countries -- just plug into the rouble -- or the Renminbi which is what the People's Republic of China uses -- then we must start to co-ordinate our thinking and our long-range directions, they must be the same. If we try, one tries, for instance, to bring another great power as a

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counterweight to the USSR or another one brought the third big power then we will be Balkanised, splintered and I think to our grievous loss.

Question : Are you confident that the communist states that are emerging in the north of Southeast Asia will be quite happy to see neutral states surviving for ever to the south of them or do you think that at some point it may occur to them that they would rather like to increase their sphere of influence and there will be very little you could do about it if ASEAN didn't have some kind of big-power backing?

Prime Minister : Could I turn the question around and say, do you expect that the Warsaw Pact countries to dismantle their alliances and draw back all the vast numbers of tank divisions, armoured divisions and artillery and so on ... ?

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