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South East Asia and The Great Powers

Let me state at the outset that what I have to say on the subject South East Asia and the Great Powers is a personal one and though it is more in accord with Singapore's policy it may not necessarily accord with views held on this subject by other countries in the region.

Before I get down to specifics, I would first like to state briefly Singapore's general attitude towards the great powers and their politics because this has bearing on Singapore's perception of the role of great powers in the region.

We accept the existence of great powers and their rivalries as an immutable fact of international life. As long as nation states exist there will be a hierarchy of powers some stronger than others and all competing to maximise their power and influence.

We do not subscribe to the prevailing belief that great powers are necessarily wicked, dangerous and immoral. They are no more these things than are small nations. The only difference between great powers and smaller nations is that when necessary great powers have the resources and the technology to effectively carry out their skulduggery. There is considerable evidence to show that smaller nations have not hesitated to bully, threaten and inflict injustices on weaker nations to further their national interests.

I mention all this as a corrective to the view that great powers are bad and smaller powers are shining examples of moral rectitude and that therefore it is the responsibility of the weaker nations to unite to liberate the world from great power demons.

Another fact of international life we accept is that like the sun all great powers exert gravitational pulls on weaker nations. The greater their power the stronger the pull. This is truer today than ever before in human history because modern technology and a global economy have succeeded in creating an irreversible system of interdependent nations. We the smaller nations may not like this and we have every reason to be nervous of the innumerable ways in which great power influence has permeated national institutions in crucial areas.

For example, the small nations have, quite rightly, to build up a defence capability against great and lesser powers. If we want an up-to-date defence system we have to buy very sophisticated and increasingly expensive equipment from the great powers themselves. True we can get better bargains during periods of intense rivalry between the great powers. But the point is that from whichever great power we buy our hardware we do become hostages of the main supplier. Not only does the supplier make substantial profits out of the arms deal, but he could if he wanted to throw the defence system of his client into disarray by refusing to supply spare parts or withdrawing technicians or worse still by supplying the client's rival with more up-to-date hardware.

Our dependence on the great powers is as crucial in yet another area -- in the field of economics. This realisation has led a number of alarmed Third World countries into launching a crusade for a new economic order to supplant the present one dominated by a handful of major industrial powers. I fully sympathise with the frustrations and anger that motivates this crusade. The Third World has a great deal of justification behind its contention that the rich countries, whether communist or non-communist, have not played fair with poorer countries.

However it is also true that a number of Third World countries have evolved economic policies which make economic growth difficult and sometimes impossible even if the richer countries were to play fair by them. Any economic system based on the premise of more for less work or on conspicuous spending on the basis of ceaseless borrowing is calibrated for inevitable failure.

In short we in Singapore accept the fact of great powers and the fact of great power rivalry in South East Asia. We might wish things were otherwise but we console ourselves with the thought that if there were no great rivalries in the region then, if pre-European history in the area is any guide, we might be confronted with less manageable small power rivalries.

Since we cannot wish away great power rivalries in the region then, in Singapore's view, the next best thing for small nations is the presence of all great powers. True there is a school of thought which says that all great powers not indigenous to the region - and at the moment all but one of those classified as great powers are not indigenous - should be prevailed upon to leave the area. Even if this were a good idea nobody has yet identified which country or group of countries in the region has the capacity to frighten non-indigenous powers out of the region. I refer particularly to the two super powers - United States and the Soviet Union - whose super power status depends on their being global powers as well. Their power and presence in our area are backed not only by satellites, inter-continental ballistic missiles, aircraft carriers and cruisers (which are in essence mobile, transcontinental foreign bases) but also by industrial and technological power which, at the moment, are beyond the range of any nation in Asia except possibly Japan.

I cannot for the life of me see how mere persuasion and declarations are going to convince the super-powers that they should willingly divest themselves of the armoury that ensures and protects their status as super-powers. I do not see the United States and the Soviet Union agreeing to transport all this complicated and expensive hardware back to their homelands and use them just to protect their territorial seas.

But there is a possibility that the nations in South and South East Asia could half succeed in their objective. Given the present uncertainty of the Americans about their role in South and South-East Asia, they might readily agree to a somewhat more ethereal presence in South East Asia. As it is they have withdrawn from Vietnam. There is now at best only a symbolic presence in Thailand. There are murmurs about cutting

down on commitments in Korea and Taiwan. After their experience in Vietnam and the readiness with which Asians take up anti-American causes one can understand if Americans have developed an aversion for Asia and things Asian. The current strategic thinking in the US appears to be of an island defence system with mainland Asia excluded and only with Japan at the periphery. Let me be quite frank about this. Should we in South East Asia wittingly or unwittingly encourage this trend in the mood of the United States then what we would in fact achieve is not a region free of great power domination but an area exposed to the influence of one great power - the Soviet Union. I do not intend this as a criticism of the Soviet Union. A great power must in the very nature of things maximise its power and influence for this accords with its national interests. This has been so in the past and I have no sound reasons to believe that it would be otherwise in the future. It is unrealistic and hypocritical to condemn any great power if it seizes any and every opportunity afforded it to maximise national power. If there is any criticism to be made it must be against those who unwittingly provide these opportunities - worse still in the belief that they were freeing the region from domination by great powers.

As I see it the choice before us in the region is whether we should have one superpower in the area or two. Better still whether there should be a multiplicity of powers.

In-so-far as the Soviet Union is concerned there is no doubt about the role she intends to play in the region. Her policy in regard to South East Asia is activist, consistent and credible. When Mr Brezhnev declares his policy towards the region we accept that his intent will match his capability.

And as far as Singapore is concerned we will continue to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union but at the same time resisting on our own or through the collective strength that ASEAN provides any Soviet influence or pressure which we believe is detrimental to our national interests or to our non-Communist way of life.

Of course ~~our capacity to resist big power pressure~~ would be greater if there were a multiplicity of powers present in the region. When there is a multiplicity of suns the ~~gravitational pulls~~ of each is not only weakened but also by a judicious use of the pulls and counter-pulls of ~~gravitational forces~~, the minor planets have a greater freedom of navigation.

So as of now the only rational course for South East Asian nations is not to work for the liquidation of great power presence in the region but rather to ensure a multi-power presence as a more agreeable alternative to a single-power dominance.

If, as Singapore believes, the former is the lesser of two evils then our problems is not persuading the Soviet Union to maintain a presence but persuading the United States and the Western powers. There appears to be a school of thought in the West, including the United States, that the South East Asian region should be allowed to be an area of confrontation between China and the Soviet Union with the Western powers doing no more than getting what advantages they can by exploiting Sino-Soviet differences. American presence in Asia would be only in those areas considered necessary for the operation of US global diplomacy. This involves maintaining a naval and air capacity as well as preserving the Japanese alliance.

This in my view is both unrealistic and naive. It must eventually end in there being one great global power in the region with the West and the United States reduced to subsidiary powers. More important the end of a Western presence in South East Asia must lead to the erosion of American and Western influence in the Indian Ocean, Africa, the Far East and even in Japan, so crucial to American global position. The Japanese know that South East Asia commands the shipping lanes that not only carry her trade to Europe but also the fuel from the Middle East and South East Asia without which her industries come to a halt. Under these circumstances the US-Japanese alliance becomes meaningless to the Japanese.

A global strategy concerned primarily with safeguarding American interests and security will give neither America or the Western world the kind of leverage the Soviet Union would

~~have in South East Asia and the rings of nations bordering the~~  
Indian Ocean by virtue of her increasing naval power and by the single-minded way in which she is asserting her right to be a global power.

So in conclusion I come back to my main proposition. In this world of harsh realities there is no rational solution for the area and for the world other than a multi-power presence in the region. In the circumstances now prevailing this would be good for the nations of South and South East Asia because it would ensure that no one power dominates the area.

I also believe it would be in the interests of the great powers themselves provided they can devise techniques for pursuing competition without confrontation. I see nothing intrinsically evil in great powers - or for that matter even small powers - competing for legitimate and constructive influence over other nations. It is possible for great powers to become greater without having to seek the subjugation and destruction of smaller nations.

Admittedly this approach towards great powers carries dangers for small nations. They would be subjected to pressures and counter-pressures of varying degrees of unpleasantness. Great powers would not hesitate to resort to subversion and exploit and even engineer conflicts between small nations in order to achieve their ends. As someone remarked a great power like the crocodile is dangerous most times. When it shows its teeth one is never quite sure whether it is smiling or baring its teeth.

Whether we like them or not we the small nations must learn to cope with fact of great powers. If we are internally strong, if we studiously avoid confrontation among ourselves and use such collective strength as we can summon not to confront great powers but to negotiate realistically with them then we can co-exist with the great powers with greater safety and with advantage to ourselves.