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SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

MC.DEG.41/73(F.A.)

Talk by Mr. Ong Soo Chuan, Parliamentary Secretary,  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the United Nations  
Students' Association on Saturday, December 29, 1973  
at 2.30 p.m. at the New Lecture Theatre 2, University  
of Singapore, Bukit Timah Road, Singapore

Current Detente Among Great Powers  
and its Impact on the Third World

When I was approached by your president to speak on the given subject "Current Detente among Great Powers and its impact on the Third World," I was reluctant to accept as it appeared too academic a subject for a non-expert like me. However, when I noted that the occasion would be a sort of a luncheon meeting to be held at the La Terrace Restaurant, YMCA, where I could treat it as a casual and friendly gathering like we usually do when delivering speeches to inattentive audience amidst the clings and clangs of cups and plates on the busy dinner tables, I convinced myself to accept this invitation while I braced for the speech.

Your president again wrote to me to postpone the date and change the venue to the Guild House Restaurant. The nature of the gathering remained unchanged. To my surprise, a third letter informed me that the talk would be held in this very academic Lecture Room which conveys the wrong impression that I am an expert on this field. Anyway, I am very happy with the delays and changes of venues as this has given me precious time to look more closely at the subject of this lecture. Admittedly, I am always worried and excited to face a more attentive audience especially of the academic type. However, since I have already committed myself, a withdrawal may not be in my favour — I am also convinced that my withdrawal from this lecture will not have the same vacuum effect, where others are more than ready to jump to fill the gap, as the American withdrawal from Asia and particularly South-East Asia.

The grim realization among the great powers that each of them possesses the retaliatory nuclear weapons to ensure mutual annihilation or inflict unacceptable damage, has made war among them pointless as well as unthinkable. So the contest for influence and supremacy will have to be conducted without resort to nuclear war or even direct

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confrontation using conventional weapons. Hence, we are witnessing a growing detente among the great powers -- a detente which has dissolved the sharp bipolarity of world politics as practised by the United States and Soviet Union in the first two decades after World War II. International relations have now assumed a multipolar character which is far more complex as it can alter the structure of world politics and change the structures and ingredients of power itself. This new multipolarity, which is a product of the detente, has altered the character of the cold war as we have known it and replaced it with a dialectic of co-operation and rivalry. This co-operation has resulted from a series of material compulsions while the rivalry has shifted to peripheral zones where the risks of the super powers are smaller.

The detente has enabled the East and West to consolidate the contacts and rapprochement between them and move on to a new chapter of international negotiations, conferences, co-operation and understanding. Encouraging signs of this development are many, e.g. the Four Power Agreement on Berlin, Nixon's historic visit to China, US-Soviet Union desire and success in spreading the area of co-operation, Sino-Japanese rapprochement, etc.

The multipolarity which has emerged with the development of Western Europe and Japan and finally with the return of China to the international game, poses a new concept of the great powers. Today the multipolar system is built out of five component powers - the United States, USSR, China, Japan and Western Europe. However, these five major world powers do not enjoy an equidistant relationship among themselves, because of their inherent different national interests compounded by the shades of ideologies -- but they do co-exist and each continues to search for more areas of co-operations with one another to maximise its position.

Hence, we find, for example, the rapprochement between the USA and a strongly anti-Soviet China compels the Soviet Union to be more conciliatory to USA. On the other hand, the United States ensures that its relations with the Soviet Union leaves no room to cause undue concern to the latter. To cite another example, Japan, in envisaging considerable possibilities in the development of Siberia and China,

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has an "equidistant" policy towards Peking and Moscow while maintaining different qualitative relations with Western Europe and the United States. In sum, bipolarism appears to be fading but this has also introduced a new type of bilaterism among the great powers as discussed above. Such bilaterism is a new phenomenon operating in the present multipolar world.

The resultant multipolarity and bilaterism brought by the detente have both obvious impact and yet uncertain implications for the Third World.

The United States and Soviet Union will continue to dominate in the security sector as nowhere is there a military or economic power equal to or able to contest either of them. However, the United States and Soviet Union are today less anxious than they were a decade ago that shifts of allegiance by the Third World countries will fundamentally affect their vital security interest. Advances in technology have reduced the value or may soon remove the necessity of having military bases stationed in the territories of willing allies. No longer will the Super Powers show the same eagerness to undertake and bank-roll major military campaigns merely to uphold their ideological preferences.

It may be true that the multipolar world has come to question the viability of non-alignment and neutralism because there are no opposite extremities against which to take a centrist position. But this in turn has also enabled the Third World countries to engage in alliances without losing one's flexibility and or independence of action over a wide range of activities. This has also opened new opportunities and provided greater incentives for countries to cultivate a wider and more diverse range of international friends than was possible in the days of the cold war.

The crucial problem for the Third World is how they should effectively use their new found mobility in this multipolar situation. The Third World should realise that in essence the detente has brought about simultaneous rivalry and co-operation among the great powers and hence the task of the Third World countries is to consolidate their independence by accelerating economic growth through not only co-operation among themselves but also with the technologically advanced countries. An .....4/-

countries. An economically strong Third World can still play a constructive and positive role in the multipolar world provided it has the strength -- strength which can come only from a strong economy. The great powers will not take a weak Third World seriously and they may even exploit the weaknesses in and among the Third World countries.

In the present multipolar situation, it would be better for the great powers, while engaging competition and co-operation among themselves, to have constructive co-operation with the smaller and developing countries. Any great power which chooses to do otherwise will alienate these countries and may have to face a broad international coalition against it.

Detente does not necessarily mean peace for the Third World countries. Rivalry and co-operation among great powers will continue. But as there is a determination or understanding among them not to risk critical confrontation between themselves, subversion and proxy wars can be pursued in a far more unrestrained manner than during the bipolar era.

The October Middle East War deserves a brief study in the context of the continuing detente among great powers. The participants of that war are now at the negotiating table because the Soviet Union and United States will it. The two super powers are aware that the escalation of the Middle East War could drag them into direct confrontation and they had to stop it.

Israel's refusal to return the Arab territories has prompted the Arabs to use one of the most potent weapons they have and that is oil. The current Arab oil squeeze has brought a partial paralysis of the economies of Western Europe and Japan. The United States imports less than 15 per cent of its oil from the Arabs, but since its strength and mobility are also always enhanced by the support of a strong Japan and Western Europe, the Arab oil squeeze has come to weaken the position of the United States. The Soviet Union and its East European allies are better endowed with oil. Thus, the Soviet Union achieves a new found mobility as a result of the Arab oil squeeze.

Everyone can appreciate that the Arabs have applied the oil squeeze in order to expedite the return of their territories now occupied by the Israelis. However, the oil squeeze has also endangered the economies .....5/-

the economics of many Third World countries which have always called on the Israelis to return the occupied territories to the Arabs. It is indeed heartening to learn that the Arab oil states have relaxed on the oil squeeze by promising to step up production again and ease export restriction to those countries friendly to the Arabs.

With a Western Europe and Japan partially paralysed, a weakened United States and a China unable to match the Soviet Union, the balance of power appears to shift in favour of the latter.

The Third World which has been further weakened by the oil squeeze is now in greater danger of being manipulated particularly if only one super power is left to dominate the situation. In other words, the basic structure and workings of the detente among the great powers remain unchanged even after the October Middle East war, but the War and its aftermath e.g. oil squeeze, has created a situation where one super power i.e. the Soviet Union has acquired much more mobility than all others. It is in the interest of all Third World countries to work for a situation where the great powers will be delicately balanced in their influence.

In South-East Asia, the contest for influence and supremacy is still on. The United States has disengaged militarily from Vietnam and continues to withdraw its remaining military apparatus. The Soviet Navy has appeared more often in South-East Asia in the wake of the American withdrawal. China has yet to have a blue-water fleet but it is accelerating the development of its nuclear delivery systems and may well be also capable of acquiring in another decade a fleet which will roam the waters outside China including those of South-East Asia. Japan has the technological and economic might to furnish a blue-water fleet at a quick notice but it has chosen not to.

If the United States backs out of South-East Asia, there will be a very pronounced uneven big power rivalry in the region and this will result in instability and insecurity which may hurt the West in the long run. Hence, it is better for the United States and the Five Power Defence Pact to stay on in South-East Asia since they are already here because to go away and return when others are already here may evoke unnecessary challenges. A balanced presence of the great powers in South-East Asia will ensure its continued stability and security.

DECEMBER 29, 1973.

(Time issued: 1440 hours)