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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT ASIA SOCIETY "CONFERENCE FOR AMERICAN BUSINESS ON ASEAN", NEW YORK, ON TUESDAY, 4 OCTOBER 1977

There is a technique in fiction writing where single character is seen through the eyes of different people. The expectation is that, at the end of the novel, a multiple survey by many observers will provide a fuller understanding of the character observed.

Paradoxically enough, this particular technique results, more often than not, in our leaving the novel with a character even more enigmatic than when we first encountered him. This is because each observer presented a personality who bore little or no relation to that elaborated by others. What in fact this particular technique achieves is that we learn more about the character of the observers than about the subject under observation.

So my presentation of ASEAN, coming after so many more expert presentations of the subject, will, even if it fails to add to your understanding of ASEAN, at least tell you something about Singapore and its perceptions about human affairs. This is another way of saying that ASEAN means many things to many people.

Some countries, in particular the Soviet Union and its allies, claim that ASEAN is no more than a refurbished SEATO to serve the imperialist ambitions of reactionary forces headed by the United States.

Then there are so-called progressive forces in Western Europe and the United States which see ASEAN as a conglomerate of conservative, authoritarian states dedicated to crushing the on-rush of liberation forces in South-East Asia.

As against ..... /2

As against these, there are also groups in the West who would like to see ASEAN convert itself into a military bloc in view of the fact that military intervention by the West in South-East Asia is no longer practical politics.

Then again, there are those who see ASEAN as a commendable charade — but a charade nevertheless. After ten years, so they say, the Association's notable achievements have been a lot of pious resolutions and a great deal of rhetoric signifying nothing. They point to in-built political, economic and psychological obstacles that stand in the way of ASEAN ever becoming a genuine regional organisation.

These various perceptions of ASEAN can be found not only outside ASEAN but even within ASEAN countries.

Now some of these interpretations of ASEAN may be superficially convincing. There are people who would like ASEAN to take on a military character. It is also true that ASEAN states, all of which are plagued by armed communist insurrection and open subversion, do co-operate on a bilateral basis to contain armed communists who operate across their common borders. It is also true that ASEAN countries exchange information to help curb communist subversion which operates on an ASEAN-wide basis.

It is also true that within ASEAN, there are different perceptions as to the pace of regional co-operation. There are some states which feel that we should move faster in the direction of greater regional cohesion and others who, on equally valid grounds, caution a somewhat slower pace.

But none of these partial truths describe the essential soundness and dynamism of ASEAN. True, we in ASEAN are no less addicted than any other organisation to passing pious resolutions. We too are partial to rhetoric and South-East Asian rhetoric and, I may add, are equal and sometimes surpass, in articulation and resonance, any in more developed societies.

But then, there is far more dangerous rhetoric in the United Nations and miles of pious resolutions gathering dust in the archives of this august world body than what ASEAN has churned out the past ten years.

Rhetoric then ..... /3

Rhetoric then is not just an ASEAN failing, nor is it a sound basis for judgement of its worth and achievements.

The best way to understand ASEAN is for us to see how and why it was formed, as perceived by those who participated in its formation. I was one of the Foreign Ministers involved in its birth and it may help in understanding ASEAN, were I to tell you why Singapore helped in its formation.

Ten years ago it became clear to Singapore, which had become independent two years previously, that the war in Vietnam could only end one way - by the eventual withdrawal of American forces from that country. One could debate whether America could have won the war militarily had it been prepared to use the full weight of its military power. But what convinced us that an American military withdrawal was inevitable was that by 1967, the war was being lost politically in the United States itself. It was by then no longer a war based on national consensus.

With American withdrawal, the end of western presence in South-East Asia, we realised, would be complete. The Dutch, the French and the British had already left, or were in the process of departing, from a region where, for century, they had held sway over palm and pine and where, they felt, they had a mission to fulfil. Now, this had become the mission impossible.

The post-Vietnam Asia, as we then saw it, would be a string of more or less contiguous communist states consisting of Soviet Asia in the North, North Korea, China (then still outlawed from the United Nations) and Vietnam. We at that time did not foresee that Laos and Cambodia too would be absorbed into the communist camp.

For the first time then, the non-communist ASEAN states had to contemplate seriously the reality of having to co-exist and live in close proximity with states theoretically committed to converting the rest of South-East Asia through their ideological kith and kin in non-communist countries to the communist cause.

On our own and as isolated political entities, we were well aware, we could not long withstand a concerted pressure by so massive a concentration of communist states operating from Asia itself.

We had also ..... /4

We had also to assume that nations friendly to the ASEAN states were in no position to come to our aid should the worst happen. Fighting for Asians who had become politically unacceptable to public opinion in Europe and in America. Though we did not at that time realise the significance of the slogan, "Asians Must Fight For Asia", there was hint enough that there would be no rescue squads from the non-communist west should the ASEAN states find themselves with their backs to the wall. There would be moral support and symbolic aid - but not much more.

The ASEAN states must learn to look after themselves. And so it became clear to us that this could be best achieved through collective strength. At that time, speaking frankly, we had no clear idea of how regional strength and solidarity were to be forged. We were well aware of the many obstacles that stood in the way of regional harmonisation, let alone integration. At least four of the states - Thailand being the exception - had only recently won their independence and any qualification to the symbols and substance of nationalism would have met with resistance. Unlike Western Europe, we had not experienced two destructive world wars to compel us to move away from nationalism towards regionalism.

Furthermore, there was nothing in the recent history of the five states to provide links to hold them together. Four of the states had been components of three different and distinct empires - the British, the Dutch and the American.

And finally, their economies had not reached that level of complexity and sophistication to require regional integration for their further development, security and progress, as was the case with the E.E.C.

Considerations such as these led some outsiders to doubt the durability of ASEAN. It seemed as most improbable organisation.

Nevertheless, it came into being and has endured for ten years, and the reason is that the ASEAN countries sought common purpose and common interest, not by searching the past for it, but by focussing on problems of survival in the future - a future whose dim outlines were already visible in the horizon.

However ten ..... /5

However ten years ago, the ASEAN states expected that the end of Western presence in South-East Asia would not take place until the eighties - possibly the late eighties. There was time enough, we felt, for ASEAN consolidation. So until two or three years ago, the pace of ASEAN consolidation was leisurely.

But as things turned out, the Western withdrawal happened far sooner than that and with unexpected speed.

The withdrawal from Vietnam coupled with detente and the abandonment of resistance to China's admission into the United Nations were seen by ASEAN nations as an indication that the non-communist states of ASEAN had to take on the burden of preserving their non-communist status themselves. If the West and particularly the United States had come to the conclusion that they could co-exist with communist Russia and the People's Republic of China, then the possibility of a communist South-East Asia, disappointing though it might be, was something the West could live with.

So initially, the motivation behind ASEAN was not belief in merits of regionalism as such, but it was more of a response on the part of non-communist South-East Asia to the Western abandonment of its role as a shield against communism.

Now however, after the end of the war in Vietnam, the ASEAN states are, for the first time, giving serious attention to the positive aspects of regionalism as such. One of the reasons was the realisation that despite the advent of a communist Indo-China, there had not been the predicted fall of non-communist dominoes. True, it looked for a moment as though the Thai domino would fall, but the Thais, without the aid of American or other foreign troops, averted the possibility of a communist or pro-communist take-over.

In my view, the dominoes did not fall because of the existence of ASEAN. After the initial shock of American withdrawal from Vietnam, the ASEAN states recovered their composure and confidence fairly rapidly. No country in ASEAN today thinks that the presence of foreign troops is necessary in the battle to preserve their non-communist status.

Had there been no ASEAN, the consequences could have been different.

Yet another ..... /6

Yet another development had compelled the ASEAN states to examine the intrinsic merits of regionalism. I refer to the advent of the recession and a corresponding weakening on the part of the rich non-communist nations of their responsibility to narrow the gap between them and the developing nations. Not only is aid now less readily forthcoming, but the developed countries are not above abandoning their hitherto sacrosanct principles of free trade in favour of protectionist policies. Some of these are being directed against developing countries who had responded successfully to the exhortation by the rich nations to go in for trade and not aid. Now the entry of products from developing countries is being fought against, unfortunately, at the instigation of progressive western labour organisations, on the grounds that workers in rich countries are being deprived of jobs by the products of cheap labour. In fact, the real grouse is that developing countries are not producing goods as expensively as they are able to do in developed countries - but that is another story.

The Bali Summit was the ASEAN response to the world economic crisis and to the hardening of attitudes on the part of non-communist industrial nations in regard to helping in the economic development of poorer nations. For the first time at Bali and in subsequent meetings, ASEAN nations tackled the more difficult problems of regional economic co-operation. Not only politically and militarily, but even economically, the ASEAN nations are now aware they must become more self-reliant.

These are admittedly only the first and very modest steps towards economic collaboration on a regional basis but, by Third World standards and circumstances, they are not inconsequential. ASEAN's efforts at regionalism should be judged not by E.E.C. standards but by Third World standards. And by these standards, ASEAN's achievements should give grounds for hope.

The significance of ASEAN and its potentialities for development must be seen primarily in the context of South-East Asia. Today, there exists in the region two social and economic systems. One is ASEAN and the other the communist states of Indo-China. These two systems will co-exist for the foreseeable future in peaceful competition.

Here is an ..... /7

Here is an opportunity to demonstrate in Asia and in the Third World generally which system can best offer developing countries peace, freedom and prosperity. One is communist and the other non-communist whose basic economic concepts and practices are closer to those of the West.

As of now, the ASEAN states are ahead. They have already muted their nationalism in the interests of regionalism. They have already set up a formal machinery to further the ends of regionalism. This is being done voluntarily rather than by compulsion. There may be conflicts of interests but not antagonistic conflicts. Collectively and individually, they are far advanced in respect of economic development and modernisation. They constitute the bulk of South-East Asia's population and account for the greater portion of the region's actual and potential wealth.

For nearly thirty years, the West expended a great deal of wealth and fought wars to prove that the non-communist way of life can better solve the problems of backward Asia - and in the end, they lost that battle.

Now in ASEAN, the West is being offered another chance to prove what crude anti-communism and interventionist war failed to do - that a non communist system can deliver the goods at far less cost.

And ASEAN can deliver the goods if the rich non-communist nations can summon enough vision to see in ASEAN something more than an attempt to five developing countries to merely survive. They are trying to prove in the process that the social and economic ideas which are the foundations of Western society can work as well in developing countries in Asia - and beyond Asia.

Policies motivated by nothing higher than protecting producers of pyjamas and undergarments in the West from competition by so-called cheap labour from Asia do not quite fit nations which are, in my view, ten feet tall - perhaps taller than that.

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