

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE

PUBLICITY DIVISION · MINISTRY OF CULTURE · CITY HALL SINGAPORE 6

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

MC/NOV/27/77 (Foreign Affairs)

77. RS-18

National Archives and
Records Centre, Singapore.

TEXT OF SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN
AFFAIRS, AT THE ANNUAL DINNER OF THE FOREIGN CORRESPON-
DENTS ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIA AT THE HYATT HOTEL
ON FRIDAY, 18TH NOVEMBER 1977

26 NOV 1977

Acc. No.

NARC

77/0051 66

You will be relieved to know that for a change I intend to keep my speech reasonably short, sweet and possible unnewsworthy. This is not because I think the free food and drinks your Association has provided me and my wife tonight do not deserve a longer sermon but because I want to give you a little more time to ask the questions you wanted to but could not.

Of course there is no guarantee that my answers, where necessary, will bear any relation to your questions and I for my part will not take it amiss if you put questions which have nothing to do with what I have said.

The subject of my sermon is the new politics of South-East Asia. I am well aware that at the moment, as far as the world press is concerned, this region is very much of a backwater. The despatches from your colleagues in Southern Africa and the Middle East are more likely to pre-empt space in your papers than your carefully composed meditations on South-East Asia. This lack of concern for South-East Asian affairs has sufficiently discouraged many European and American experts on South-East Asia and Vietnam into taking crash courses in Swahili and Arabic because African and the Middle-Eastern experts are today the mass-media gurus.

But I believe that in the not too distant future the pendulum of world concern will swing back to South-East Asia and Asia generally. Southern Africa and the Middle East are in the forefront simply because the great powers have returned to these new arenas as more convenient venues to continue their contest for power and influence now that it has been temporarily suspended in our region. Sooner or later, as in South-East Asia, the power game in Africa and the Middle East will also reach

a point where the next move must mean the transformation of proxy wars into direct conflict between the great powers. This I am convinced the great powers will not consciously do because no interest outside their borders is worth a nuclear war - as in the nature of things a direct conflict between the great powers must sooner or later entail the use of nuclear weapons.

That is why I have never conceived of a Third World War in terms of a clash of arms between the great powers. I have maintained that the world wars of the future will be an inter-related series of manageable proxy wars fought by and in Third World countries. These are initially petty conflicts between small nations but which are sooner or later transformed into instruments of power politics. In this sense the Third World war started even as the Second World War ended in a series of proxy wars which began in Korea and has moved about since then all over the Third World.

So one day the focus of world interest will be redirected to South-East Asia and those who are now frantically boning up on Swahili and Arabic may have to polish up their rusty Vietnamese, Thai and Bahasa Indonesia.

But when the great powers return it will be to a South-East Asia radically different from the one they temporarily abandoned. The international environment itself would be vastly different from the one that existed during their earlier involvement in our region.

My prognosis about the circumstances in which a new Cold War will be resumed in South-East Asia are, of course, largely speculative but there is such a thing as informed guesswork. I am not disclosing any state secret when I say that foreign policy making, far more than governments are prepared to admit, is informed guesswork and when a foreign policy ends up in disaster one can be sure that the guesswork was built more on misinformation than on hard facts.

As an aside may I say in this connection that one of the necessary ingredients of a successful foreign policy is to deny the enemy as much solid information as possible and make available instead as much misinformation as the gullibility of the enemy can stomach. So if from time to time newsmen find secretiveness of government in matters of foreign policy irksome, it is not always a case of a government wanting to cover up dark deeds but an understandable reluctance on the part of government to play poker with all cards on the table when

its opponent is allowed to hold them close to his chest.

In that kind of poker game I would put my money on the player with cards closest to his chest.

Returning to my main theme the new Cold War will be staged in a South-East Asia no longer under the direct control of any major power. The first Cold War was initially mixed up with questions of anti-imperialism and later with issues of Communism and anti-Communism. These issues directly or indirectly were concerned with preserving the centuries old Western dominance of the area. The peoples of the region were largely indifferent to the issues of the First Cold War because they felt that they had no stakes in matters relating to great power interests. What the peoples of South-East Asia did instead was to use the rivalry of the great powers, by leaning now towards one and then the other to get what assistance they could to achieve their somewhat different goal of national independence.

The Vietnam war was essentially an anti-imperialist struggle but exceptional in that it was the only anti-colonial struggle in Asia spear-headed by a national movement theoretically committed to Communism.

In the first Cold War great power presence was exclusively Western. Chinese influence in South-East Asia was mainly ideological and consisted of moral support for indigenous anti-Western forces.

Japan was content to move under the shadow of the United States umbrella and devoted its great energy and talents primarily to becoming a great economic power.

And as for the Soviet Union its presence in South-East Asia in the early days of the Cold War was ethereal rather than actual and physical. It relied on the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin to erode Western power and dominance in South East Asia.

But in the new Cold War there will be a multiple system of great power presence. The most notable feature on the new power balance in South-East Asia would be an actual Soviet presence. This is no longer ethereal. Russia has broken out of two centuries Western naval containment. She has extended into half of Europe, the Mediterranean and into the Pacific. She does not lack the capacity to compete effectively with the United States for a place in the Indian Ocean over which until recently Britain was the unchallenged guardian. The great power contest now going on in the Middle-East may involve high sentiments

and oil to keep Western industries going. But it also has a great deal to do with the Indian Ocean whose problems are going to dominate international politics for many decades to come. This is why East Africa, which until now had played a marginal role in great power rivalries has now become a major arena of contest between the Soviet Union and the Western powers. It has now become an area of internal turmoil and proxy wars, as South-East Asia was not so long ago.

If my guess about the Indian Ocean is sound then sooner or later a stalemate position, will be reached in East Africa and the Middle East and the contest will once again move to other areas fringing the Indian Ocean - and South-East Asia is one of these.

In this connection Singapore has always taken the view that the ideal solution would be Indian Ocean free not only of great power rivalries but also of medium and small power rivalries because mini-rivalries can in no time be converted into great power contests. However to judge by performance so far in the series of law of the sea meetings the vast majority of nations are more interested in the carve up oceans than in idealistic solutions. So the ideal solution is not at the moment practical politics.

This being so a rational balance of great power presence in the Indian Ocean is more likely to assure freedom of the seas than futile decrees commanding global navies never to darken the doors of the Indian Ocean.

It is no use debating whether a Soviet naval presence in the Indian and other oceans is a good thing or a bad thing. It is there and will be there and that's that. What we should really consider is how to maximise prospects for peace in our area on the basis of great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean.

Uncertainties in regard to this arise from what I would call the differences in style of Western and Soviet presence. Soviet presence is more confident and less faltering. When the Soviets assert that they will exercise their right to sail the Seven Seas I believe them because I hear no contrary views in their mass media or in their Congress. Whenever the Soviets suffer a setback in the great power game - and they do as often as the Western powers - they do not spend years on unseemly breast beating, gruesome post-mortems, or abandonment of the game.

Like a hardened boxer they take a few deep breaths, to shake out their dizziness and re-enter the fray determined to win the next round.

Western democracies, because they are democracies, must quite understandably have dissenting views on almost everything. Some democratic purists even maintain that societies which democratically elect in favour of cohesion rather than dissent is suspect. This may be admirable democratic doctrine but in my view something of a handicap in the deadly game of power politics. A democratic government might be sincere when it says that it will balance power for power in the Indian and other oceans but if its opponents, with prospects of winning the next elections, disagree openly (and they might have to disagree to win the next elections) then outsiders not familiar with the shadow play of Western democratic politics are naturally confused. They must either assume that opposition leaders in the West do not mean what they say and in fact agree with the ruling faction (in which case we must pay them the compliment of being politically insincere and dishonest) or that they mean what they say in which case friends of Western governments had better not close all options.

The other new element in the politics of South-East Asia is Japan. She is a world economic power and has so far been satisfied with that role. But her allies in the Western world are now troubled by Japan's economic strength. She is not now considered a political threat but economically she is being treated as more and more the No. 1 enemy of the West. If economics become the major determinant of foreign policy in the next few years - and there is much evidence pointing that way - then a completely new element will enter into Asian and South-East Asian politics. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that among the many causes that led to Pearl Harbour, according to some Japanese interpretations, was the economic constricting of Japan by the Western world. Given her great technological capacity and considerable economic power she could become an operational nuclear power of magnitude any time she decides. The present leadership and mood does not, it is true, favour such a new departure but when pressures and strains become unbearable leadership can change and so can national moods.

The other new element in South-East Asian politics is now elaborations of the growing Sino-Soviet antagonism which has more to do with history predating their respective revolutions than disagreements over interpretations of Marxist texts. During the first Cold War the

Sino-Soviet conflict was not much of a factor.

It will be so in the new one.

These then are some of the elements that will go to make up international politics in our part of the world in the future. How they will mix what combinations and alliances will be formed and reformed in the course of its development is something we can look forward to in the coming decades with hope or despair. This will depend on what we in the region do; the policies of the great powers.

Whatever it is South-East Asia will once again become an area for decisions crucial to itself as well as for the world.

National Archives of Singapore