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SPEECH BY MR S RAJARATNAM, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 10 MAR 1979
AT A SYMPOSIUM ORGANISED BY THE JAPAN COMMITTEE ON
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I have been asked to talk about the significance of ASEAN in the context of South-East Asian politics and of its importance for Japan.

I shall begin with the relevance of ASEAN to Japan's own future. Insofar as we in ASEAN are concerned we fully realise the importance of Japan for us. It is the only major industrial power in Asia which, like the United States and the European Economic Community, can really help ASEAN realise its objective of creating a coherent regional community out of five nations embracing some 250 million people.

So we in ASEAN do not need much convincing that we have a vital interest in the prosperity and political integrity of a non-Communist Japan.

But what I am not so sure about is whether the Japanese people are as deeply convinced as we are that they have as high stakes in the survival and progress of ASEAN. After all Japan is not only a super-industrial state but it is also a country with widespread global economic links. It is true that ASEAN is Japan's third largest trading partner, after the United States and the OPEC countries. In 1976 ASEAN accounted for nearly 11 per cent of Japan's total world trade - which is about half Japan's trade with the United States.

Nevertheless for Japan, ASEAN is one of many trading partners. If trade is the measure of a country's importance, a diminution of trade with ASEAN could be serious but not crippling for Japan. So Japan's economic stakes in ASEAN may not be

sufficient to justify my thesis that the integrity of a non-Communist ASEAN is vital to the survival of Japan.

So I must shift my presentation to a different area - the area of geopolitics - to justify my case. Only from this standpoint can Japan better appreciate the new realities that have emerged in East and South-East Asia since the end of World War II. Until the collapse of American military power in mainland Asia these new realities were not self-evident. The global picture was essentially the pre-war world superficially modified to fit in with the conventional view that some countries won the war and others lost it.

I say conventional because the proverbial man from Mars would be hard put to it were he to land on our planet today to identify who won the last war and who lost it.

It is a safe bet that he would be wide off the mark. He would definitely identify Japan among the victors. Certainly West Germany would be high on his list. I think it would be most indiscreet of me to name the losers.

But the country that would top the list made by this very logical Martian would be the Soviet Union. He would argue that before the war there was only one Communist state in the world - the Soviet Union. Today the Communist world, embracing many nations, stretches without break from East Berlin to the waters of the Mekong. Moreover there are pockets of Communist or pro-Soviet countries scattered over other continents.

But most relevant to Japan is that all of East Asia, with the exception of South Korea and Taiwan, profess the Communist faith. This reality did not matter very much to Japan so long as there was a massive Western military presence in Asia and a deep commitment by them to the integrity of non-Communist Asia.

With the withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam this presence and commitment have become more intangible. So we in ASEAN and you in Japan are now compelled to cope as best we can with the real post-war world. There are new realities which require new approaches and new solutions to the different problems confronting non-Communist Asia.

When confronted with complex political problems, the first important task is to find out who is on whose side - who is friend and who is foe. This is not as easy as it sounds and more often than not political failures and defeat of policies can be traced to fighting the wrong enemy with the wrong allies.

Non-Communists have made this error in the past, resulting in serious setbacks to their cause. However we should not feel too depressed about this, because there is some consolation and even hope in the fact that Communist nations, too, are capable of similar errors. What is happening in Indo-China today and the dangerous confrontation now building up between China and Soviet Union are classic examples of utter confusion over who are friends and who enemies.

So the first question Japan should ask herself as she stands on the threshold of real post-war politics is: Who are my friends and where are they?

For those Japanese who want to ensure a non-Communist Japan, the obvious answer would be: South Korea and Taiwan. The first is in the Asian mainland and the other is an island nominally a part of Communist China. Apart from these two where else are Japan's allies?

I put it to you that the next nearest neighbour and ally you have in Asia are the 250 million people of ASEAN. True you have other non-Communist neighbours bordering the Pacific but they are on the far side of this vast ocean.

Now you may say that Japan has lived more or less comfortably with a Communist East Asia for the past three decades and so it can possibly live with a Communist ASEAN as well.

But I suggest to you a Communist ASEAN implies different consequences for Japan than does a Communist East Asia. It has to do with the geopolitical role of ASEAN. Japan's sea routes into the Indian Ocean and beyond to Europe and Africa are channelled through the Java Sea and the Malacca Straits. The vital raw materials, including oil, which keep Japanese industries going are channelled through the ASEAN region.

Not only sea-routes but Japan's air communications to and from Europe and even its telecommunication links, to a significant extent, pass through ASEAN countries.

An ASEAN, ideologically hostile to Japan can, by blocking these arteries, even briefly, throw Japan's economy into serious disarray. A Communist East Asia is geopolitically not in a position to seriously disrupt Japan's communications network or isolate it from the outside world.

Of course there is the Pacific backdoor to give access to the world but that, at great expense and inconvenience, only solves Japan's communications problems.

There still remains the political problems associated with Japan having to live with a Communist East and South-East Asia.

I admit that the depressing geopolitical picture I have drawn is exaggerated and somewhat one-sided. It requires many qualifications one of which is that the wall of Communist states in East and South-East Asia is not all that solid.

This is also the new reality which we must take into consideration for the future. It is one which convinces me that the non-Communist order of things is not, as the Communists believe, on its way out. Over the past three decades the non-Communists have lost faith in their cause because most of the anti-Communist wars they fought ended in disaster. The last of the great anti-Communist wars was in Vietnam and the debacle there led many non-Communists to believe that the march of Communism was irreversible, especially in developing countries.

But fortunately for us the end of the Indo-China war also brought to the surface a new reality which anti-Communist hysteria had long concealed from us.

It is that Communist theory and practice are two different things. So long as the Soviet Union was the only Communist state in the world, critics of capitalist states, including non-Communists, had a romantic view of Communism. It was everything that capitalism was not.

But as more and more Communist states came into being - and there are now some 25 of them - the practice of Communism had much in common, not with the mixed-economy of so-called capitalist nations, but with the brutalities and oppression of the early capitalism that Karl Marx described and condemned so passionately.

I do not want to belabour this point too much except to point out one telling fact. The people and not the learned theorists of politics are the best judges of which is the better kind of society. It is a remarkable fact that every time a country is liberated on behalf of Communism, the first manifestation of liberation is a flood of refugees. Their movement is generally one way - from liberated areas into reactionary capitalist strongholds. It is very rarely the other way.

True to form one of the first things that happened after the liberation of Indo-China was the unprecedented flight of thousands of people from liberation. I say "unprecedented" because there were far fewer refugees from these countries when unliberated leaders were in charge of them. There were certainly no boat-people until after liberation.

The other Communist myth that the practice of Communism has now shattered is that capitalism is the cause of wars and that therefore with the establishment of Communist societies national wars would disappear forever.

In view of what is now happening in Indo-China today it would be hard for even a dedicated Communist to reiterate this doctrine and keep a straight face. In any case he cannot because the Chinese, the Russians, the Vietnamese and the Kampuchians are accusing one another publicly of waging aggressive national wars and urging their respective allies to launch liberation wars against fellow Communists.

So this brings me to yet another new reality. I believe that the age of capitalist wars is more or less over. Two destructive World Wars have taught the major capitalist nations the utter futility of wars. I cannot imagine Western European nations ever going to war with one another or Japan with them.

The new reality is that we have entered an age of Communist wars and Asia, unfortunately, has been made the battleground for the first of such wars. Now I have enough regard for the theories of Communism to say that these wars have very little to do with the ideals and the intellectual profundities of Marx.

Under the cloak of Communism, the practitioners of Communism are really xenophobic nationalists fighting, like the Capitalists of old, for national glory, national aggrandisement and for loot.

In other words they have assimilated all the vices of the old capitalism with little of its virtues. The growing confrontation between China and the Soviet Union and the multiple wars being waged in Indo-China are essentially conflicts between nationalisms rather than between varieties of Communism.

Recently Teng Hsiao-ping said that he was punishing Vietnam primarily to remind them, among other things, that they are not, as the Vietnamese believe, the third strongest military power in the world.

This is not a Marxist interpretation of history but a nationalist interpretation of history.

If, as I believe, we have entered an era of Communist wars the role of non-Communist nations is clear. They should first of all try to end these conflicts if they can. They should resist the temptation to add fuel to these wars in the expectation that the Communist states would exhaust themselves in the process. This is a dangerous approach because beyond a certain point wars cannot be confined to Communist states.

Of course we cannot stop Communist states from exhausting themselves if that is the price they are prepared to pay for possible victories. In which case all that we non-Communist states can do is not to be drawn into wars between Communists and more important use the time that Providence has bought for us to consolidate and strengthen our position. Sooner or later through sheer attrition or the sudden dawning of wisdom Communist wars too must come to an end.

When they do the non-Communist world must remain intact and strong to contribute effectively and decisively towards the real task from which we would have been temporarily distracted by Communist wars. It is to create a peaceful world of prosperous nations - communist, non-communist, socialist, monarchist, liberal or what you will.

So this brings me to the role that ASEAN can play in strengthening the cause of non-Communism. In South-East Asia today two social systems exist side by side and that system which better satisfies the needs and aspirations of people would have decisive impact on other Third World countries. Over the past three decades Third World countries have been trying out, generally unsuccessfully, all kinds of systems including the Communist variety.

As of now non-Communist ASEAN is performing better in every respect than the competing system in Indo-China. ASEAN has many imperfections but no ASEAN would today willingly elect to go the Indo-Chinese way.

Let me contrast the two not because I want to denigrate the Indo-Chinese efforts but merely to help Japan and other non-Communist nations decide who are their friends and foes in South-East Asia. This does not mean that we in ASEAN do not want the Communist system to succeed in Indo-China. If it can that would be even better for ASEAN because a prosperous, peaceful and progressive Indo-China means a good neighbour. ASEAN can sleep peacefully at nights.

But what we want is to do better than our neighbours. This is what Khrushchev once described as peaceful competition between different social systems and this is one of the best prescriptions I know for world peace and progress.

I think we are doing better for the following reasons.

ASEAN has done something which very few developing countries have yet to achieve. We have harnessed our individual nationalisms to the cause of regionalism. True our regionalism is rudimentary. It breaks down when it comes to economic matters. But it can assert itself when the occasion demands it. It did after the precipitate

withdrawal of the Americans from Vietnam when the general prognosis was that the ASEAN dominoes would fall.

One of the firm believers in the domino theory were the Vietnamese. Among the first things they did was to proclaim that their next task would be to bring genuine independence to the rest of South-East Asia. They brought pressure on individual ASEAN nations in an effort to promote new wars of liberation.

Instead they came up against unsuspected but effective ASEAN solidarity. For the time being liberation wars are off the programme.

Today, to cut a long story short, Communist China has changed from a critic to a supporter of ASEAN. Even the Russians and the Vietnamese, though not prepared to go as far as the Chinese, are less critical of ASEAN.

As against non-Communist ASEAN solidarity we have contending Indo-Chinese states where attempts are being made to forge a matching solidarity by way of occupation armies.

The second time ASEAN solidarity manifested itself was when Vietnamese forces invaded Kampuchea. At the Security Council and among the non-aligned nations it was not the Soviet, Chinese or the Vietnamese view of the incident which was accepted but ASEAN's view.

Economically, politically and culturally ASEAN's performance is miles ahead of that of the Indo-Chinese states. By Third World standards ASEAN's performance in crucial aspects of social, political and economic organisation has very high rating. As a model for the Third World to adopt and emulate it has more to commend it than the revolutionary models which some Third World countries adopted with conspicuous unsuccess.

So in helping ASEAN to help itself Japan and other non-Communist industrial nations would be helping themselves for a fraction of the cost they expended in fighting unsuccessful and largely disastrous anti-Communist wars. Japan need not send troops to ASEAN countries to ensure that they remained non-Communist. Investments, access to Japan's lucrative markets, transfer of technology and generally getting away from the concept that ASEAN should only be a provider of raw materials are the weapons with

which Japan and other non-Communist nations can successfully fight Communism.

Better and cheaper this way than sending troops when all is lost or just caving in and joining the other side.

This approach to ASEAN by Japan means painful decisions but not as painful as the consequences of what is now a vigorous and united ASEAN, for lack of understanding and far-sightedness on the part of major industrial powers, lose the lead it now has over its competitor.

Of course this also implies painful changes and new approaches by ASEAN countries to give more substance to their regionalism. Assistance by rich friends should not become crutches to perpetuate our weakness. However this is a theme for another occasion when I meet my ASEAN colleagues.

As I am today addressing a Japanese audience I would like to conclude by saying that since ASEAN is a going concern you have everything to gain and little to lose by seeing that it remains a concern better than the one next door.

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