

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER,**  
**MR LEE KUAN YEW, ON THE AGENDA ITEM**  
**“WORLD POLITICAL SCENE” AT THE**  
**COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING**  
**AT LUSAKA ON WEDNESDAY, 1 AUG 79**

I accept the honour with great reluctance because it is not easy to stand in place of Morarji Desai. I do not have either his age or share his detached view of the problems which beset this world. These remarks which I wish to make really reflect my perceived reality of the world as it is today, not the world we thought we would be having when we agreed to foregather in Zambia two years ago, but the world as it exists in June 1979.

The meeting reflects in many ways the fascinating problem we all face of managing an organisation which started with five old dominions and now has 40 members. And the structural changes required to give everybody a sense of participation has not been adequately met. And that is one of the problems of the contemporary world. The United Nations, designed after the war by five great powers with less than fifty members, has now to cater for the divergent, conflicting and competing interests of over 150 members. It is just unable to cope. So too the IMF. So too GATT. If we can reach accommodations to make it possible for everybody to feel that they have got something out of this

conference, relevant and of value to them, then the Commonwealth will continue to have meaning.

We all have to live with the pluralities of our world system. We are the keepers of our brothers' conscience. We are as concerned with Southern Africa as you are. We have learned that it is necessary to be concerned if we want you to be concerned with Southeast Asia. It is one interdependent, interreacting world. The first reality it is best we acknowledge is that we can take liberties with stronger countries as there is a strategic stalemate because neither the United States nor the Soviet Union has overwhelming force. So under this new Roman arch of nuclear missiles instead of bricks, we are able to find some leeway for manoeuvre. I once asked this of an American: Why it was that they could not cut a deal with the Soviets as the Europeans cut deals among themselves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and carve out the world? He was an idealist and an adviser to successive Democratic presidents. He said it was offered by Stalin to Truman, and Truman tossed it out. I do not attribute the Americans with such a charitable instinct. I think it would have been untenable. First, because in the 1950's, Britain was still a considerable power, and by the 60's the French had got their nuclear weapons, and so had the Chinese.

Our problem of adjusting to this world is to learn how we can anticipate shifts in the power balance. So I would like to expound, or extrapolate, my experience of Southeast Asia in the context of a changing power balance, and allow you to pick up what is also relevant in your part of the world and test to see if this experience is not in fact just one facet of a total world situation.

Human beings cooperate and contend, whether in tribes, whether it is modern nation states. And when the communists posed an overwhelming threat in the 1940's and 50's, particularly after China appeared so solidly with the Soviet Union as a monolithic communist bloc, the West reacted and coalesced. And from 1945 to 1954, the French, with the support of the Americans, held the Vietnamese communists, from the failure at Fontainebleau in 1949 till Dien Bien Phu and Geneva in 1954. The French then opted out. The Americans took up the burden and soldiered on for 21 years with participations from the Australians, New Zealanders, and others interested in that part of the world. The communists won in April 1975.

What is astonishing is that the result of that victory was not what everybody assumed would be the case, a relentless expansion of communist strength and influence. In 1959, in fact, China had begun its first quarrels with the Soviet Union. By 1969, we now know that there were grave conflicts that

nearly led to war between the Soviet Union and China. This was the opening that allowed Kissinger to go to Peking to arrange for President Nixon's visit in February 1972. The Vietnamese decided that their Chinese comrades could not be trusted - seeds of future conflict.

So what we witnessed today was the totally unexpected. The Americans have opted out of the mainland, the Chinese found themselves presented with a Vietnam with a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, signed in November last year. In December, on 25<sup>th</sup>, the Vietnamese openly invaded Cambodia, a fellow communist state. If nothing had happened and nothing would have happened if the Chinese had not risked putting that Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation to the test, it would have been a sombre future for Southeast Asia. As it was, on 18<sup>th</sup> February, after much prior publicity of the limited nature of the operation, the Chinese moved into Vietnam. They pulled out in March, after nearly four weeks. They were breathtaking days. For three decades after the war, it was Pax Britannica and Pax Americana that held a semblance of peace and stability. Now a new balance of sorts has emerged, one which is a sorry admission of the limits of America's power and the growing strength of the Soviet Union. In this particular instance, because China saw her own national interest challenged by another communist major power, she

intervened. We do not rejoice in it. Nevertheless, we are its beneficiaries, for the time being.

This is our dilemma - a dilemma which will concern us in more and more parts of the world. A multipolar world theoretically, means a diffusion of power centres. In reality it makes for greater anxiety because nobody is in total control.

After three decades of fighting and great triumph and victory, the outcome was not a glorious peace and a building up of the communist millennium. The outcome was more conflict, more war, more devastation, more bitterness, more inhumanity than at any time of the American attacks on the Vietcong or the Vietnamese in North Vietnam. It is unbelievable but it is true. The outcome has so far been an exodus of 350,000 to 400,000 boat people, of 200,000 Cambodians or Kampuchians fleeing across the border to Thailand and the prospect of one or two million of Kampuchians who will either have to cross their border to Thailand to get food or die of starvation because the rains have come and no planting has taken place. And who has made all this suffering possible?

Warfare on that scale is not possible without the logistic support. Vietnam has got the skills of war, but she has not got the sinews of war. She has not got

factories that turn out the artillery pieces, tanks, ammo, aircraft. It is Russian aircraft that have ferried Vietnamese troops from Ho Chi Minh City to Siem Reap. The Russians have taken over air transportation of Laos, once provided for by the Americans. There is no millennium. Why? Because a certain momentum is built into the system which leads to more and more conflicts. Eventually, a balance may be reached. That balance has not yet been achieved with any measure of stability in Asia; it has not been achieved in Africa, in Southern Africa in particular; it has not been achieved in the Middle East.

What are the relevant lessons that I draw from this? It is that unless we, the small nation states, can find greater stability and security by rafting with each other, then we will be the arenas in which this contest for supremacy will go on. It is a cruel, relentless, pitiless contest. Fine sentiments were expressed at Geneva about the unnecessary degradation of human beings. But the stakes are high. There was a power vacuum when the Americans withdrew from the mainland of Southeast Asia. A preemption was attempted through a regional power. That preemption was contested.

Our dilemma is acute. If there had been no intervention, we would face Vietnamese supremacy, which in this case means Soviet supremacy. If the intervention is over-successful, it means that in 10, 15 years there will be an

assertion of influence, perhaps not amounting to hegemony, by a communist power that has influence over all guerilla movements in the countries of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

A stalemate is best for us - a stalemate which leaves us more years in which to consolidate our security, increase our cooperation and widen our options to choose our partners in economic development and progress. It may sound a farfetched dream. But three weeks ago the first signs of such a possibility appeared. The Voice of the Revolution of Thailand, the Thai Communist Party, has gone off the air. They broadcast from Yunnan in South China for the past seven years, inciting revolution. So do the communist parties of Malaya (which means Malaysia and Singapore), the Philippines and Indonesia. Now the broadcast to Thailand has stopped.

Is there such a power balance option for Africa? I do not know. I am not familiar with the details of the conflicts nor the contradictions. It is in our interest to exploit these contradictions intelligently within the ambit the great power conflict affords us. From my experience watching the communist system at work, I am greatly impressed by its capacity to organise human societies to produce the weapons of war, to develop the muscles of a war-like society. We also know now that for all the grandiose 5-year plans they regularly proclaim,

they are unable to match the free-market economies of America, Western Europe, and Japan. And the Chinese last year took one of the boldest steps ever made by a communist power in openly acknowledging that their only hope of achieving their four modernisations was in fact to get access to Western technology, capital, know-how. A price will have to be paid. I do not have to teach the Americans what price to extract, nor the West Europeans, nor the Japanese.

The lesson for us is that if we want to make progress through strife, and strife is the only way, then that ally has got to be the Soviet Union. I say this not because I wish it to be so but because I know it has to be so. I have seen conflicts in Southeast Asia and I have seen how Soviet weaponry plus human resolve have brought down American prestige. But I also know that four years after that conflict ended, the Soviet Union and her allies in COMECON could not get Vietnam going again. This is the enigma of our time - that the communists grow stronger and stronger in military terms but more and more cumbersome and inefficient in satisfying the needs of their own people and of those who are their allies. They have to import food; they have to import consumer technology; they have to import sophisticated technology, whether it is drilling bits from the Americans to explore for oil or a FIAT assembly line from the Italians. The sheer output of their weapons system, however, has made them the predominant



power today in Western Europe, and slowly but relentlessly an equal naval power in the Pacific with the Americans. Three weeks ago, the Japanese, who have taken a very low profile since 1945, decided that their defence agency put on record the fact that with the arrival of the Soviet aircraft carrier, the Minsk, in the Pacific sailing all the way from the Black Sea, and with access to friendly ports like Cam Ranh Bay, the Soviet navy will be equal to, if not stronger than, the present American fleet. This has grave implications for all of us.

I do not pretend to be able to see the future. None of us can. It is not preordained. It is what we choose to make of it. If communist military strength can be held and there is no war, there are no widescale conflicts, there are no opportunities to exploit their military superiority, then the free-market economy will beat them. But if in third country areas outside the major arenas of confrontation of Western Europe and the Sea of Japan, absolutely critical to America, there are no more erosions, no more Ethiopias, Afghanistans, then the free-market economies will continue to flourish.

To my African friends, the experience I can pass over is: Do not assume that conflict inevitably leads to victory, inevitably leads to the desired objectives. But if cornered without any alternative, then conflict is the only way. It is a difficult choice. It is one Africans have to decide, but in the full knowledge that

there is a certain dynamic, a momentum in conflict itself. One cannot turn violence on and off like a tap.

We all believed in 1975, right up to 1978, that the skills and discipline of a people at war for 30 years if turned to constructive pursuits, could build Vietnam into one of the great industrial nations of the world within 20 years. It is not to be. They are locked in more combat. A dynamic for conflict has been built into their system.

One tentative conclusion from my experience in Southeast Asia: For the first time in human history, we are not fighting isolated battles. We are part of one inter-reacting world. Whether it is Americans committing atrocities on the Vietnamese, or whether it is Vietnamese inhumanities on others (Kampuchians and refugees), it is no longer a world in which events are isolated from the world.

The Vietnamese did not want to go to Geneva. They had to go. They pretended that world opinion did not matter. But it does matter. The number of refugees slowed down just prior to the conference. And I believe it will not resume before Havana (in September 1979). And I ask my African friends: Do not acquiesce in this conquest and the installation of a puppet regime. If you do, you are not our friends. We know better than anybody else what is at stake because it is our future. When the Foreign Ministers of the five countries of ASEAN met in Bali

at the end of June 1979, they asked that all Vietnamese troops be withdrawn from Kampuchea and that the Kampuchean people be allowed to decide their own future. If, in fact, Heng Samrin does represent the Kampuchean people and is their saviour from the atrocities of Pol Pot, then so be it. Underneath this nuclear arch, we are dicing with each other's future.

At the end of the day, we are all human beings, caught up in one of the most tumultuous periods of change in human history. We have no precedents to go by, no examples in the past. The science and technology that the West have pioneered and have created is a totally different world. And if we can persevere and build, sometimes destroying in order to build, then perhaps this historic conference in Lusaka would not have been in vain. Every conference is a historic event. Those of us who participated in the conference in London, in 1962, when Britain wanted to go into the Common Market, remember that was an historic occasion. It did not work out the way Mr Macmillan, then Prime Minister, thought it would. Britain did not get into the Common Market in 1963. By the time she did in January 1973, she was so weakened that when the oil crisis struck in October 1973, membership became a liability.

I was in Lagos in January 1966. I see a few faces here who were present then. I did not believe that sanctions would bite in a matter of weeks rather than months. But we had to go through that.

What we do this weekend does matter, or I would not have come. It can make the difference between more conflict and less conflict. I do not believe that the difference is between conflict or peace. Too much of the dynamics of conflict have already been built into the system. If what was done in April 1979 in Rhodesia had been done in 1973 when the Tories were in office, I believe Lord Pearce would have returned with a different assessment. But that was a chance lost, and we live with 1979.

I have shared with you some thoughts not out of nostalgia but out of a desire to be helpful. I undertook the responsibility of these opening remarks with great reluctance because, as you know, Mr Chairman, it is difficult for me not to speak my mind - a luxury I find more and more I can ill afford. Perhaps if I have done nothing more than to remind us to take seriously the consequences of the positions we shall be taking, then your decision to ask me to open it may not altogether be misplaced courtesy. It is not I who am going to die, nor are my properties at stake, my home my cattle, but I have seen destruction; I have seen

war. By the position we take, we either diminish or we increase the likelihood of more destruction, more pain, more suffering.

National Archives of Singapore