

Asean Security at the Turn of the Century: Towards a Collective Agenda

Dato' Hj Abu Hassan Bin Hj Omar

Introduction

The subject of my speech is "ASEAN Security at the turn of the century: Towards a collective agenda". In his letter to me, Mr. Rajaretnam, the Director of the Information & Resource Center, says that it is time to consider "Thinking the Unthinkable". I can assure this audience that Foreign Ministers do very often "Think the Unthinkable". The only problem that all Foreign Ministers have is that whilst they very often think the unthinkable, they can practically never quite say the unsayable. Not if they want to serve their country; and perhaps as importantly, not if they want to keep their jobs.

On a more serious note, let me say that I will try my level best to be true to my assigned task, to address the issue of ASEAN security all the way to the end of the twentieth century, but concentrating primarily on the next five years. To be true to the subject, it is important for us to remind ourselves at the outset about the meaning of "security" as we understand it and not as some Russians, Germans or Tibetans understand it. With one or two possible exceptions, we of the ASEAN six are the most secure states of the region. I think this is not with one important characteristic that distinguishes the states of the ASEAN community from the other states of the region: the fact that for more than a generation all of us have practised and, therefore, have developed sophisticated doctrines of comprehensive security.

We have suffered economic attacks intentional or otherwise. We have encountered social unrest. We have had to fight ideological subversion and political aggression. All of us in the ASEAN community have had to fight and win internal conflicts or wars of the gravest kind. All of us understand that a state can only be secure if it is able to develop comprehensively, psychologically, ideologically, socially, militarily, politically and economically. All of us appreciate that there can be true security only when a resilient state can defend itself comprehensively: through reliance on its psychological resilience and its social cohesion and social measures, and thorough economic development and economic means, as well as through its military capabilities. We all know that we need to fully utilise our diplomatic skills, our fleetness of foot and our political wits.

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Introductory Remarks

YB Dato' Haji Abu Hassan bin Haji Omar, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, Datin Wan Noor bte Haji Daud; His Excellency, Mr Peter Sung, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and National Development, Singapore; General Rafael Iletto, Philippines National Security Advisor; Ambassador Hashim Taib from Malaysia; Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening and welcome.

As the search for peace is gathering momentum over Cambodia, ASEAN decision-makers and academic specialists are now assessing the future of Southeast Asia with some optimism. It is believed that momentous developments are unfolding in the global and regional environment that will ultimately bring about a solution to the 10-year conflict. This augurs well for a post-Cambodia era of peace and stability. It is also expected that the forthcoming Sino-Soviet summit will complete the process of general detente among the great powers.

Against this backdrop of the changing strategic landscape, the situation in the Philippines stands as a disturbing reminder. While the country has made remarkable economic progress in the last 3 years, the Philippines nevertheless remains the only state in ASEAN with a serious Communist insurgency. ASEAN decision makers therefore cannot ignore the fact that any destabilization of one member of ASEAN will inevitably affect the security environment of the whole grouping. This strategic landscape will become more confusing as the United States and the Philippines enter into negotiations later this year, to determine the future of the US military bases beyond 1991. As of this moment, the fate of the bases remains uncertain.

It is in this context that the Information & Resource Center is organizing this international conference on Beyond 1991: Implications of a US Military Withdrawal from the Philippines. The title of the conference may sound alarmist, but that is not our intention. In fact, only yesterday, the US Vice President Dan Quayle expressed confidence that the lease would be extended. But whether the lease agreement would be extended or not, what is certain is there will be great economic, political and strategic costs for the Philippines, as well as for the region if that future of the bases remain undetermined.

The objective of the conference is to force ourselves to seriously assess the

dramatic scenarios that will occur in the event of a US military withdrawal from the Philippines. We believe that it is not too much to attempt to think the unthinkable because public opinion, as well as thinking in official circles have for a long time been too comfortable with the thought of an unremovable US presence in the region. This conference is intended as a modest contribution to thinking in that direction.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great privilege for the Information & Resource Center to welcome the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Malaysia, the Honorable Dato' Haji Abu Hassan bin Haji Omar, to deliver the keynote address to the conference.

Dato' Haji Abu Hassan comes from the state of Selangor. He spent his formative years at the famous Malay college, Kuala Kangsar, before completing his tertiary education at the University of Hull in England, where he obtained his MA degree. He was a member of the Malaysian administrative and foreign service from 1964 to 1968 where he had a distinguished career in public service. He resigned in 1978 to go into politics and has been as Member of Parliament for Kuala Selangor for three terms. Since his election in 1978, he has held various cabinet posts; most notably for Transport; and then from 1984 to 1986, as the Minister of Welfare Services; and from 1986 to 1987, as the Minister of Federal Territory; and since 1987, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Dato' Haji Abu Hassan has also been given several distinguished awards, both local and foreign, in recognition of his contributions to his society. In 1987 he was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Science by the University of Hull and in 1988, he was awarded the Knight Grand Cross of the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant by the King of Thailand.

We have asked Dato' Haji Abu Hassan to discuss the security agenda in the next decade. The title of his talk, this evening is "ASEAN Security at the turn of the Century: Towards a Collective Agenda". I have therefore the very great pleasure to invite Dato' Haji Abu Hassan to deliver his keynote address.

M Rajaretnam
Director, IRC
4 May 1989

ways extremely risky. Some trends appear so clear and so set in direction that they must be fully considered in any account of the years ahead.

Firstly, the decline in the age of ideology, rooted in the loss of faith in the command economy and in socialism as a method. One by one, the dominoes have fallen. I believe, one by one, they will continue to fall. Do not get me wrong. I do not suggest that there will come a time when ideology will count for nothing. There has been no such time in world history. What is very clear, however, is that the great ideological contest between communism and anti-communism is not what it used to be and is unlikely to be the same again - in terms of the passions it generated, the attention it secured and the resources it consumed. The prospects for greater peace in our time are the better for it.

Secondly, accompanying the ideological weariness and the loss of political fervor has been the increasingly widespread realism about the amount of power nations can get out of their military capabilities. Again, do not get me wrong. Military capability is extremely useful. We are foolish if we do not have the minimum necessary military capability. We must always keep our powder dry. But there was a time when a single gunboat could result in the conquest of an entire nation. Look at what four black American ships did to the then already mature nation of Japan. With a few thousand white men in red uniforms scattered here and there, the biggest empire the world has ever known was built. Today, both the military superpowers are at the peak of their military capabilities - even as they have fallen to their weakest political positions since their rise to superpowerhood. Less and less power will flow from the barrel of the gun, in a world where there have been changes with regard to the very essence of crucial strategic power.

I think we will not go far wrong if we argue that we have already entered into an age of "Soft Imperialism" or an age of expansion by "other means". This is a much more civilised age. Nations can still be conquered: but more likely by means more seductive than the blowing up of men, women and children. In this new age of soft imperialism, what will increasingly be important is not the number of people a nation has, but the talents and the diligence of its populace. What will increasingly count will not be the size of territory that an expansionist power possesses, but

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The world is set to change greatly. Can we assume that this region of Southeast Asia can somehow be insulated from the changes at the Pacific and global level? Should we assume that the future of Southeast Asia will be a re-run of the Southeast Asian past? When we talk of ASEAN Security by the turn of the century, therefore, might it not be foolish for us to assume that

the ASEAN of 1999 will be an association of six states? The ASEAN of 1979 was, after all, not an association of six Southeast Asian nations, but five. However I will deal only with what should be on the collective agenda of the present ASEAN six.

What we should do, of course, must hinge upon what will happen in the world, in the Pacific and in our own region. Prediction is al-

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its ability to penetrate markets and to cause other nations to be dependent on the money it can lend, the services that it can render and the products that it can make at home and abroad.

The years ahead will also be substantially affected by what my prime minister has referred to as the process of "modernization in the five kingdoms". This is the process of fundamental internal reform which was first embarked upon by China; then by the Soviet Union; then by Japan (in the form of developing its internal demand and internal sources for growth); then by the European Community (now involved in an effort to create a single market by 1992). The United States can be expected to pursue the logic of its own need for fundamental internal economic transformation. We can thus expect all the large powers to be deeply involved in the process of internal changes in the 1990s.

We must continually remind ourselves that history does not always travel in a straight line. But should it travel more or less in the same direction, we should expect substantial progress in the US-USSR rapprochement. The Gorbachev-Deng summit must be expected to produce substantial steps in the second big rapprochement. Do not be too surprised also if we do not have to wait for the 1990s before we see movement between Moscow and Tokyo.

With regards to the small rapprochements, let me mention to you the progress in Northeast Asia:

As with the rapprochement between China and South Korea and between Taipei and Beijing; at the opportune time, we must expect a breakthrough between North and South Korea. In the Western Pacific, let me mention the movement as between Hanoi and Beijing; Bangkok and Hanoi; Bangkok and Vientiane; Bangkok and Phnom Penh; and ASEAN and Indochina.

It would be foolish of us to look at the world through rosecoloured glasses. Let me also here mention what might be called "The law of the one". The law of the one states that even in an environment where so many things are working for the good, there is always the possibility that one event, one factor, can triumph over the many. One factor can turn the entire flow of history. God knows, there are many candidates for this one factor that come readily to mind. There is the perennial nightmare of the madman with a nuclear bomb. What if something "catastrophic" happens in the inevitable dismantling of the Soviet

system in Eastern Europe? The possibilities are only as great as our imaginations.

On the balance of probabilities, however, I believe that the positive political factors now beginning to exert their influence on the world stage provide an opportunity for creative ASEAN action of most substantial proportions. At the same time, having convinced you that I am an incredible optimist, let me now convince you of my incredible pessimism. For just as I believe that we see before us a positive correlation of political forces of historic proportions, I believe that on the economic side is a configuration of factors portending enormous comprehensive danger.

First, the world is slowing down in terms of rate of growth. This is not a prediction. It is a description of reality. No one believes that the United States's and the OECD'S rate of growth of the last two years can be sustained. The figures already show that their aberrational recent performances have already started to come down. Most consequential to the security of the world and to our own security will be the depth and the duration of the economic slowdown which has already started.

The second security threat all of us in the ASEAN states face is the structural slowdown in the rate of growth of international trade. The current Uruguay Round is crucial.

Even if it succeeds it is very improbable that in the nineties we can achieve the trade growth rates of the seventies, which allowed the Four East Asian Tigers to leap forward. It is virtually impossible that we can achieve the trade growth rates of the sixties.

The third threat we all face is that of protectionism. Whereas once upon a time, protectionism was needed to protect the infant industry, today protectionism is too often necessary to protect the industry that is senile, that is old and that is ailing.

I think by now you will be tired of this exposition on the clear and present danger arising from the economic threats facing us all - threats that are not potential, but already very real, that are already biting us, preventing us from performing even better than we have done in the last 20 months, thus affecting our short, medium and long term security.

I shall merely list the others. Among the factors, I believe you must count the fact of excessive currency fluctuations. Then there is the small matter of a persisting international debt crisis that cannot and will not go away. This is not a

central problem for Latin America and Africa alone. And in ASEAN, it is not a problem for the Philippines alone, although it has been argued that the Philippines will face a severe debt crunch in the early years of the 1990s.

There is also the problem of rising interest rates. There is the problem of rising inflation rates. Not the least of these threats also is the one that arises out of the United State's inability to reduce sufficiently its federal budget deficit and its trade deficit, resulting from such structural factors as the US inability to save more and consume less, the steady erosion of America's ability to compete in a host of strategic economic areas, American full employment, the lack of extra production capacity, which is needed to produce goods for export.

Connected to all this is the problem of economic conflict which for us of the free world has a particularly pernicious aspect. It is the characteristic of political and ideological conflict that generally takes place as between adversaries and between states that are not intricately linked in a web of rich and fruitful relations.

It is the central paradox of economic conflict that it is likely to be most intense and most frequent between states that are friends, that have the closest and most comprehensive ties.

To be sure, we are at last seeing a degree of economic cooperation amongst the most economically powerful countries that was not seen in recent times. But this has been matched by an escalation of economic contradiction and conflict. It might not be too far from the truth to assert that much of the future of the world, and of the ASEAN community, will hinge on the race between their economic cooperation and their economic conflict.

Before ending this analysis of the opportunities and threats emanating from the wider world, I feel it would be ridiculous not to mention a factor that could be either a threat or an opportunity, but that most certainly will be one of the most important single factors affecting our future: This Is The Japan Factor.

Let me put it to you that Japan is the single most dramatic opportunity to all the states of the ASEAN community all the way through to the twenty-first century. My comments, let me add, have not been in any way influenced by the fact that Japan's leader, Mr. Takeshita, is this very night in Jakarta, after being in Bangkok,

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Kuala Lumpur and here itself in Singapore.

Japan provides us all with enormous opportunities. The first Japan opportunity lies in the field of direct foreign investment, arising out of "Endaka", the age of the high yen. We have already seen the tide. There will be the deluge. The second Japan opportunity lies in Japan's need to recycle its surplus funds. There are great opportunities for attracting healthy portfolio investment. The third lies in the market that Japan provides. The fourth lies in its overseas development assistance programme, which can be expected to improve in terms of quality as well as quantity, as Japan emerges as global number one on ODA. The fifth Japan opportunity lies in the field of technology, the sixth in its tourism, as tens of millions of Japanese will go overseas each year; and the seventh lies in the cultural and educational field.

Because of these opportunities, my country welcomes Japan most heartily. So do the ASEAN states. So do the states of Indochina. Let us not be romantic. The Japan factor can and will be an enormous force for our good. We will not turn it away.

As you will no doubt have sensed, all this is leading to an attempt to answer the questions: What should the present ASEAN states collectively do in the years ahead, and what should be our position vis-a-vis the issue of the American facilities in the Philippines?

Before we proceed to give an answer, there is another factor to be reckoned with. And that is to examine the specific regional threats that will face us in the years ahead. Let me put it to you that the states of ASEAN do face serious security threats tomorrow. But I believe that our most serious security threats will be internal ones.

I believe that the serious and certain threats that we will face in the future will arise from failures in healthy economic development; failures in uniting our peoples against instability and prosperity; in providing jobs for the unemployed; in political institution - building; in strengthening the rule of law; in dealing with corruption; in containing social abuse; in managing social extremism; and in securing social justice.

You will note that I have not yet mentioned Kampuchea. It goes without saying that all the ASEAN states will continue to be concerned about the Kampuchean question. We should not falter or be found

wanting at the eleventh hour. But the issue is in such a state of flux, one day suggestive of a positive breakthrough and the next day portending the continuation of such a great human tragedy. Nonetheless, we all must hope that at the turn of this decade, not of the next, a just, viable and productive comprehensive solution will be found to the Kampuchean question.

Given the expectations about the opportunities which we should grasp and the threats which we should counter in the 1990s, what then should be on the collective agenda of the ASEAN six? Dozens of things but I need to concentrate on mainly four.

First, however, should we reconsider the question of an ASEAN Defence Community? I presume that this issue is always under consideration. And why not. In fact, it is my belief that we must take the ASEAN states to new heights of political and military cooperation and regional reconciliation in the days ahead.

Let me remind the audience that the first phase of regional reconciliation resulted in the very formation of ASEAN. More than 20 years ago, we decided to put our quarrels behind us in a historic act of regional reconciliation. It has taken us time to establish the pax ASEANA, the system of peace, freedom, trust, understanding and cooperation that is the ASEAN community of today. It will take us a long time to realise our vision of a single Southeast Asian system consisting of states that are free and at peace with one another. It will take a long time for us to patiently build up the structure of trust, understanding and cooperation for all of Southeast Asia that we have collectively built for ASEAN. But I suggest this is a journey that we must undertake.

Second, even as we must launch an offensive into Southeast Asia, I believe that we must launch an equally important offensive into ASEAN itself. In the years ahead, there will be a need to strengthen ASEAN unity and ASEAN political cooperation. We must not take our achievements for granted. We cannot afford to be diverted and to assume that the path of development will be sustained. The ASEAN peace we have built requires constant repair, maintenance and renovation. There is a need to ensure that second and third generation ASEAN leaders will be equally committed to the association. There is also a need to strengthen ASEAN, not only in the minds of men but in terms of its practices and its institutions.

There is a third major offensive which I think is necessary. To grasp the opportunities that are before us and to deal with the threats that already confront us, we have to take ASEAN economic cooperation to new heights. There are two dimensions to ASEAN economic cooperation. The first is the internal dimension. The second is the external dimension.

The Manila summit was a triumph for ASEAN economic cooperation, at least in so far as the agreements made on paper. There is much we must do to turn commitment to reality in order to respond to the needs of our domestic development and in order to withstand better the tide of economic adversity that will come from the outside world. Externally, where much ASEAN economic power in the past has lain, we must collectively do more in order to have a bigger say in the Pacific and world economic affairs. If we are not on the field and in the game, we will merely be spectators. No one will foster our economic interests and protect our vital economic goals if we do not do it ourselves. United, we might be better heard; separated, we risk being murmurs drowned by the cacophony of raised voices.

Fourthly, I believe that it is time for the ASEAN states to launch a strategy of comprehensive engagement. This policy has a political-military side. I do not believe that we have much to gain by kicking big and powerful people in the teeth. We must aspire to the omnidirectionality that has been the touchstone of Japanese external world philosophy. Where possible, we must seek to be a friend to all and the enemy of none. Where possible and consonant with our national interests, we must aspire not to be equally distant, but to be equally close. Such are our ties with North America, with Western Europe and with Northeast Asia that there are parts of the world with which we cannot, but be especially close.

If we are not able to fully draw in the United States, the countries of Western Europe, the NIEs and other states into full and comprehensive participation in key sectors of our national economic life, what we will see in ten years or even in five is an ASEAN community that is excessively dominated by Japan. Whether Japan desires it or not, its economic hegemony will be overpowering. In the case of both economic and military balance, what is necessary is not an absolute balance, but the prevention of an excessive imbalance.

Now let me turn to the question of the American facilities in the Philippines. It is an important question for it has many ramifications for the Philippines, for our friend the United States, for the Pacific and for the even wider world. It could determine the pace and the content of the regional reconciliation process which I have talked about. Its relevance to ZOPFAN, the process that ASEAN has committed itself to these last 17 years, is too obvious to state. Although there has been one interesting argument that the perpetuation of the American facilities in the Philippines is a necessary condition for the eventual achievement of ZOPFAN, since they provide necessary leverage and will need to be there until the Soviet Union is prepared to withdraw from its own facilities in Indochina.

By no means least, it has also been strongly argued that the precipitated withdrawal of the American facilities, conducted in the wrong manner and under the wrong circumstances could do tremendous damage with regard to the central economic concerns that I mentioned during my exposition on the need for a strategy of comprehensive engagement. Do all this mean, therefore, that the bases question should be on ASEAN's collective agenda.

I personally believe that this is a matter that should be resolved within the context of Philippines - United States relations. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the sacred ASEAN principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of any member nation. If we are asked for our views, I am sure we will be happy to give them. But this is a question that

must be decided by the Philippines itself.

I do hope that whatever comments I have made do not constitute interference in domestic affairs. I am sure your comments over the next few days, as you debate the whole issue, will constitute such interference. But you do have an edge over foreign ministers. You cannot only think the unthinkable, but also quite easily say the unsayable.

This is the full text of a talk by YB Dato' Hj Abu Hassan on the "Asean Security at the Turn of the Century: Towards a Collective Agenda" on 4 May 1989 at the Marina Mandarin Hotel, Singapore. The talk was hosted and sponsored by the Information & Resource Center.

Information & Resource Center

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