

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER ON THE
OUTLOOK FOR THE SEVENTIES IN SOUTHEAST
ASIA TO THE GERMAN ASSOCIATION FOR
FOREIGN POLICY, IN BONN ON 21ST APRIL
1971

I feel privileged to have the opportunity this evening to share some thoughts with you on the situation in Southeast Asia as we see it at the beginning of the decade of the seventies. We in Southeast Asia like you here in Germany are cursed, as the Chinese sages put it, to live in interesting times. In Germany, the bold foreign-policy initiative of the German Government have broken the accumulation of years of frozen attitudes and policies. They open up interesting possibilities, pointing the way to new dispositions and arrangements in Europe, which can have constructive and long-term consequences, not only for Europe itself, but also for the rest of the world. We in Southeast Asia are passing through a similar phase in our history. The assumptions and expectations of the last decade, indeed of the last two decades, are now being re-examined with fresh eyes. Distance from the scene of potential turbulence and trouble may induce greater dispassion in our discussions. And it is good therefore that here in Bonn we should have the opportunity to consider the developing scene in Southeast Asia and the future outlook for the region.

I refer advisedly to the developing scene in Southeast Asia. It seems to me useful to remind ourselves that human affairs cannot be divided into neat compartments of time. Change is often imperceptibly developing and growing over a period. The elements which go into the political equation—the facts of history, of demography and of geography, the needs of defence and security, the problems of development and trade, these remain. Nevertheless it is good that today, at the beginning of a decade of fresh prospects and possibilities for the countries of Southeast Asia, we should consider the period which has just passed and speculate on the future course of events.

Looking back at the past decade, two outstanding features in the international political climate are clearly discernible. First is the fact that the ideological division of the world has become more

complete, it is no longer a bipolar or even a tripolar world of the sixties. Monolithic ideological groupings are no more. Revolutionists pit themselves against Revisionists in the socialist camp. The emergence of a strong Western Europe introduces a forceful new element in the Western Alliance, indeed nationalism in both Eastern and Western Europe has contributed immeasurably to breaking down the orthodoxies and rigidities of the previous decade. Likewise Afro-Asian and non-aligned solidarity are but a shadow of what they were ten years ago.

The second feature is a growing awareness of a regional identity of interest. Speaking more particularly about the developing newly-independent countries, it can be said that their sights are now turned to the regional stage, away from the international stage on the one hand, or from the capitals of the former colonial powers, on the other. There were others of these states who were more cautious or inhibited and whose sights were not focussed very far away from their formal colonial powers.

Today, things have changed. The glamour has now gone. The facts of international life are such that states cannot expect, with impunity, to play for very long a role on the international stage out of all proportions to their strength and capacity. At the same time the cold-war animosities between the two power blocs have also since abated.

Following from the above, a number of features can therefore be said to characterise the Southeast Asian scene at the beginning of this decade.

First is the minimising of the cold-war. The era of confrontation between the major powers has given way, if not exactly to one of the conciliation, at least to a period of adjustment of particular points of differences or conflict. This does not imply the giving-up of ideological attitudes and commitments; it means rather that the animosities and antagonisms of the past have given way to a hard-headed realism, that bargains and compromises can be struck on individual issues. We in the newly independent countries do not therefore have to be corralled into a crusade against one side or the other. The development is of course to be welcomed although at the same time we shall have to maintain vigilance that the agreements among the big powers are not reached at our expense.

Second is the increasing consciousness of the newly-independent countries of our primary responsibility for our own defence. This is not to deny that in the face of external encroachment the support and assistance of friendly powers would be useful—and indeed often crucial. But it means an acceptance that our security and stability must be our primary responsibility and that it is only when we have done our utmost for our own defence that we may expect assistance from our friends and that such assistance can be productive and effective.

Third, following from the de-emphasis on ideological concerns and from the attitude of increasing self-reliance, is the priority given to internal domestic preoccupations and, in particular, to the question of economic development. After the immediate exuberance of independence has come the realisation that first things must come first; and that at the top of the national agenda is the question of putting our own houses in order. National unity, sound administration, law and order, economic development, defence—these are matters which demand, and which will receive, the highest priorities in the coming years.

Fourth is the decreasing expectations about the effectiveness of international institutions in the quest for economic development. Hence there is the growing emphasis on co-operation with neighbouring countries either bilaterally or multilaterally. The limitations of regional economic co-operation are well recognised. Nor at the same time is the importance of sound bilateral co-operation with the industrialised countries or of the possible usefulness of international institutions minimised. Regionalism by all indications is growing with ever increasing vigour and it is here to stay.

The de-emphasis on ideology, increasing self-reliance, priority on domestic concerns and regional co-operation—these are the characteristic features of the Southeast Asian scene today. The first flush of independence has come and gone as we now embark on the very serious business of making that independence meaningful.

International society today is a world of sovereign states who act and adjust with one another as they each try to find or maintain their role on the international stage. However, the most striking absence from the international society is not those states which are not yet independent; but a state, large, powerful, ancient, and undoubtedly independent—I refer of course, to the Peoples' Republic of China. It is sometimes said that China's exclusion

from the international mainstream is self-imposed. I believe, however, that to telescope into such a phrase the series of actions and reactions going back to twenty years and more is to put the matter too simply. But I do not think it is profitable at this stage to attribute blame or seek justification for these developments. We accept the work as it is, not as we would like it to be. But it is a fact that as a result, the international status quo, or, more specifically, the regional status quo, must undergo profound re-adjustment before a regional order can emerge which is in the interest of all countries, including China, to support and sustain. The question we face, therefore, is this: on the one hand is China, and on the other are the countries of the region, (and with them I link the other major powers who exercise various forms of pressure and persuasion on them)—are all these countries ready for a period of adjustment and accommodation of each other's legitimate interest? And what at bottom are those legitimate interest? For China surely it is the right to play a role in regional affairs commensurate with her importance and dignity as a major power and the right to expect that the countries of the region do not act in ways which adversely affect her. For the countries of the region, it is the right to expect that their sovereignty and territorial integrity be scrupulously respected and the right to pursue their own policies and their own ways of life as independent sovereign states. And for the other powers, it is the right to play a role in the region commensurate with their own legitimate interests.

Are these "rights", these expectations, reconcilable? I believe emphatically that they are. But of course whether they will be, depends on the foreign policy attitudes of the powers concerned.

In so far as China is concerned, it is perhaps too early to predict the future course of events. Chinese foreign policy in the closing years of the sixties was erratic, if indeed it can be said that she had followed a foreign policy which was anything more than a reflection of her domestic intra-party squabbles.

Recent developments, however, have been most encouraging. Chinese attitudes as can be seen from various statements and actions are premised upon a more sober and realistic acceptance of the international order. As for the other major powers, one can estimate a similarly realistic reappraisal. The price of maintaining

the present status quo is too high: in any case they can, I think, conceive an international order which meets their national interests at a much lower price.

What then of the Southeast Asian countries themselves? Here again, I believe that the rigid assumptions of the past are being scrutinised with fresh eyes. Of course, I can speak only for my country and, in this connection, the proposal for a neutralised Southeast Asia guaranteed by the three super-powers indicates our thinking of the direction we should pursue. The road is long and difficult before we will arrive at our objective; but it is important, first of all, to know where we are going. But let me for the present say on this. While the attitude of one country to another is determined by a series of actions and reactions, the fundamental link in that chain, in so far as the reactions between small countries and large countries are concerned, is essentially the attitude of the latter.

Having shown a willingness to re-appraise and re-adjust, it must be emphasised that the attitude of the countries of Southeast Asia to China will depend in the final analysis on her attitude to them. This therefore is the central foreign-policy question for the countries of Southeast Asia:—does China agree that inter-state relations must be based on the acceptance of the fact of their independence and hence on the sanctity of existing international boundaries and on non-interference in the internal affairs of other states?

I mentioned earlier the trend towards closer regional co-operation. That regional co-operation is desirable cannot be questioned. That it has limitations is equally obvious. It is useful that occasionally we should remind ourselves of the problems and obstacles which lie in our way lest we become too euphoric. But at the same time I do not think that we should belabour the point; instead we should devote ourselves to planning and implementing projects and programmes which are realistic, imaginative and forward-looking. I would also expect that countries of the region would play an increasingly important role in intra-regional conflicts.

Regional co-operation in various fields aided in some cases by powers external to the region, principally the United States and Japan, has been gaining momentum since the closing years of the

sixties. We should also not overlook the work of ECAFE and the Colombo Plan. Above all, there is the region's own indigenous organisation, ASEAN, created by the countries of the region themselves as a result of our own initiative and fashioning our own methods of work. It is true of course that projects under the auspices of ASEAN are still in their initial stages and they are of limited scope and magnitude. They can do no more than assist and supplement the individual efforts of the member-states including their co-operation with other countries and with other international institutions to secure their own welfare and well-being. Nevertheless, these projects represent a forceful start and auger well for the future of Southeast Asia.

I wish to draw particular attention to the extraordinary growth of a sense of regional identity and regional interest as a result of these activities in ASEAN and the other regional bodies in the last few years. It would be true to say that in the early sixties, the capital cities of London, Washington, Paris, Bonn and Moscow were more familiar to us than those of our neighbouring countries. Today as a result of our regional activities, and also of visits and meetings of Heads of State or Government and of Ministers and officials, journalists, businessmen, students and tourists, we have become more aware of one another and of the problems and interests which bind us together.

This growing sense of regional identity and regional solidarity should be encouraged and fostered. It is not directed against any state outside the region nor does it adversely affect their interests. On the contrary, it serves well the cause of regional peace by bringing about an atmosphere of goodwill, mutual trust and friendship among the countries of the region and in this way it serves well the interest of all countries who are concerned with stability and harmony in Southeast Asia.

How should this growing regional consciousness be cultivated? A number of countries of the region for various reasons do not consider it appropriate to join a regional body such as ASEAN. But I do not think that regional co-operation in Southeast Asia should be restricted to the lowest common denominator which is acceptable to all the countries concerned. I believe that the countries of the region should try to forgo the closest possible links on a bilateral level with one another. Malaysia's co-operation with Thailand on our northern border and with Indonesia on the

Sarawak border in East Malaysia as well as our co-operation with Singapore in the context of Five-power defence arrangements are cases in mind. Such bilateral contacts on any subject and at whatever level which may be mutually acceptable should be pursued as far as possible. In this way a criss-crossing network of bilateral links would be established which would contribute to an atmosphere of regional understanding and harmony.

Having put our own houses in order and minimised the possibility of intra-regional conflicts, the countries of the region would then be in a better position to seek an undertaking from the major powers—China, the Soviet Union and the United States—to guarantee their independence, neutrality and integrity. Southeast Asia would then become a neutral region, free from the entanglement of big-power rivalries and free from external threats as well as from external political subversion. This, I believe, should be high on the regional agenda for the nineteen seventies.

From today's vantage point we can expect the nineteen seventies to be a time of uncertainty, even perhaps of turbulence, until we can see more clearly how the Vietnam conflict would resolve itself, and what the attitudes of the major powers would be to the developments within the region. Some of the factors which will go into the equation of Southeast Asia are beyond our control and are still in the realm of conjecture. I would therefore only wish to draw attention here to four features, nearer at hand, which are clearly emerging.

The first is the increasing interest of Japan in the affairs of the region. After a long period of "low-posture" foreign policy, Japan has taken several initiatives in Southeast Asian affairs, notably in the realm of economic co-operation and in her bilateral relations with countries of the region, particularly Indonesia. Japan also played an important role at the Djakarta Conference last year and it is a role which she may be increasingly expected to play. As a major power, however, there is a danger that Japan's own interests and alliance may sometimes be at variance with the views and policies which Southeast Asian Countries wish to pursue. Considering the economic, industrial and technological advancement of Japan, Southeast Asian countries naturally welcome this development in their desire to break out of the pattern of merely being a source of supply for primary products

and a market for manufactured goods. I emphasise this objective for it is the only basis on which any meaningful relation can be built.

Next there is also the increasing interest of India in regional affairs. India has played a remarkable and distinguished role in international affairs particularly during Mr Nehru's premiership and it appears that she has now taken a conscious decision to play a greater role in Southeast Asia. She is perhaps a late starter in the field but I am confident that with persistence and goodwill she can make up this lee-way and contribute by her own political experience and technological expertise to the development and welfare of the region.

Perhaps most encouraging of all, there is a development within the region itself, namely, the success of the Indonesian Government in overcoming the back-log of problems left behind as a result of the dangerous and sterile policies of the Sukarno/Subandrio regime. Indonesia's potential in political, economic and military terms, towers above that of any other country in the region and the stability of Southeast Asia is intimately linked with the stability of Indonesia. The failure of the Gestapu in September 1965 was a major turning-point not only in regional but also in international affairs. Since then Indonesia has steadily and progressively consolidated herself and it may therefore be expected that she would play an increasing role in ensuring the security and stability of the region.

Finally, a note on what is potentially one of the most constructive forces for the future: I refer to the political awakening of the youths. The ferment of the young is of course a world-wide phenomenon which has manifested itself dramatically in many countries of the West—not forgetting of course, the Generasi '66 much nearer home. There has now grown up in our countries, a new generation, restless, eager and full of idealism, whose political memories do not go back to the colonial period and who are therefore impatient with comparisons with the past and with dogmas and ways which they regard as irrelevant to the needs and demands of the times. They feel alienated from their own governments but they are anxious to play a part in lifting their age-old societies out of the poverty and stagnation of the past into the scientific and technological age. I am confident however that their energies and enthusiasm can be constructively

channelled and that, tempered by the complex realities of the situation, they would make an immeasurable contribution to the building of the modern and advanced societies which is our common goal.

Gazing into the future of the region, I may venture to say the seas today are no longer calm although the storm clouds have not broken. The challenges and the dangers of our voyage into the seventies will test us to the fullest, whether we will truly be masters of our own destiny or whether we shall merely become passive agents of the policies of other powers. The margin of error in our reading of the compass and our responses to the changing winds is small indeed.

In the face of great dangers, great demands are made. For myself I maintain a cautious optimism. I believe that countries of the region have the will, the resources and the capacity to create a truly secure and stable Southeast Asia which is the product of our own adjustment and accommodation and in which we shall be free to pursue our policies to secure the good things of life for our people.