

THE THIRD PACIFIC DIALOGUE

HOTEL ISTANA, KUALA LUMPUR, 21 NOVEMBER 1996

I would like to thank the organisers for the honour of addressing this distinguished gathering of business leaders of the Pacific Rim and others who are interested in the affairs of this region.

2. This Pacific Dialogue is basically a gathering of outstanding personalities from the United States and East Asia. I wonder whether I may be permitted to say a few things to our American and Asian friends and to conclude with just one thought which it might be useful for us all to ponder together.

3. To our colleagues from across the Pacific, let me press three points. First, may we of Asia ask for a little understanding, a sense of fairness, a little time and a little space. By all means, do not let anyone of us, Asians, hide behind excuses. Let all oppressors and despots fear the conscience of mankind to which Asia as well as America must fully contribute. But let us be fair. We will lose nothing by so doing.

4. Second -- and here I direct my remarks not to America's politicians, media and NGO's but to America's enterprising corporations -- you have so much talent, so much creativity. You have so much to give, to contribute to our future and to your bottom line by coming out here to rebuild your companies or to take them to a higher level of performance and profitability. I would urge you to 'Go West', go West beyond the boundaries of your continent and your current imagination. Be our companion on our long journey to full modernity. Help us to build a new Asia.

5. Third, let me speak of productive partnership. Come and let us -- America, Asia and whomsoever wishes -- let us join hands in a joint venture, to build a new World, a global commonwealth such as the world has never seen, worthy of the hopes of mankind and worthy of the 21st century.

6. We, all of us have a right to ask that we be allowed to earn our daily bread the old fashioned way, through the sweat of our brows and the hard work of billions of our people. The developed among us have all the advantages -- technology, capital, rich domestic markets, educated workforce, market savvy, experience, organisation. They have all the products to sell. Those of us in Asia are only beginning to learn to produce manufactured goods, relying only on our cheaper labour cost, cheap because our cost of living is still low and our expectations not high. Surely you must admit that the threat we pose is minimal. Yet of late there has been such a crusade for leveling the playing fields. When the contest is between giants and midgets, would a level playing field be enough to ensure a sporting chance for the midget? Surely many of the businessmen of the West and even politicians play golf and understand the need for handicaps.

7. Most of the developing world have only the industriousness of their people to count on and the scraps which they can hope to pick up. Yet even this seems to be too much. There are so many amongst the rich who want to ensure that this

single advantage, this one competitive element, is neutralised. If the rich take from the poor the only thing which they have, the only means by which they can work their way out of the pit of poverty, where is the justice? Or does it not matter?

8. When America was young and growing, finding its way and working its way up in the world, Europe did not demand that European institutions be introduced, that European labour practices be adopted, that you don' t expropriate the land of the natives to grow wheat and tobacco and to rear cattle. For a time they even allowed you your slaves. Nor did they or anyone else stop you from clearing forests because of concern for the wolves and the bears, the mountain lions and the rattle snakes. Europe in fact was happy to buy the products that you exported with no question asked. But of course that was then, not now. Things are different now. We are all a lot wiser and perhaps a lot more humane. But is it humane and wise to keep so many Asians in a state of poverty for whatever reason?

9. I will not defend pollution and the desecration of the environment, the theft of intellectual property, the destruction of whole peoples, child labour. But as you look around, do you see us doing nothing else except these terrible things? We try, but as you may have noticed poor people are usually more desperate than the rich. They pollute and they chop down trees simply because they cannot help themselves. Electric ovens and gas cookers are still luxury items for a majority of Asians. Cutting down trees for firewood or for a living may be the only way out. The alternative may be uncooked meals or unemployment. We would like to manufacture sophisticated products on our own and market them worldwide but most of us don' t know how under environmentally ideal conditions or cannot afford. Besides, if we do try we are told that we are not treating our workers right. Also we have to pay royalties or we are simply denied the technology. To subsist we have to chop down forests and opt for low tech, low pay labour intensive industries.

10. We speak of Asian values, meaning hard work, respect for authority, discipline, submission to the interest and the good of the majority and filial piety. Suddenly we find Asian values equated with authoritarian rule, disregard for human and workers rights, political stability and economic success at all costs. We must now discard Asian values and adopt the so-called universal values as conceived by the West.

11. Our American and European detractors have forgotten that enormous tribulation separated the clarion call of "liberte, egalite, fraternite" and a truly democratic France. The First Republic replaced the absolute monarchy of the ancient regime with the imperial glory of Napoleon. The French saw a revolution not only in 1789 but also in 1830 and 1848. The 1848 revolution saw the birth of the Second Republic. The Third Republic came with the overthrow of Napoleon III after the Franco-Prussian War. The Fourth Republic came to an end after the Second World War and the collaboration of the Vichy government with Hitler. It all took time and I don' t think that even now French democracy is perfect.

12. In the United States of America two centuries and one civil war stood between the American Declaration of Independence where you so rightly proclaimed the virtues of democracy, where you so rightly proclaimed that "all men are created equal" and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Two hundred years. One civil war. And so many tribulations in between.

13. Women were granted the right to vote in Italy only in 1945, in Switzerland only a few years ago. The aborigines of Australia were granted citizenship, the right to vote, and full recognition as human beings only in 1967. But there still survive a few who, even now believe that the new attitude towards the aborigines and indeed the abolition of the White Australia Policy are mistakes.

14. So many of us Asians were not granted the right to democracy or even the right to govern ourselves, the most fundamental of human rights, until recent years. It is interesting that so many of us, who were regarded as obviously unfit for self rule and democracy for hundreds of years were required to be good or even model practitioners of democracy the moment the colonial flag was lowered and the flag of independence went up. No time at all is given. Perfection at the first try is required of us Asians. Having multi-parties and holding regular elections are not enough. To be truly democratic we must change Governments with each election, endure civil strifes and frequent disruptive demos and strikes and generally verge on anarchy. We should of course not do well economically and challenge the established developed countries.

15. None of these means that democracy is not important for Asia or that human rights are of lesser relevance to Asia than it is in other parts of the world. To argue the former is to utterly misunderstand the task at hand. To argue the latter to Asians who have advanced faster and more fundamentally with the human rights of hundreds of millions -- at speeds never before seen in human history -- is to betray incredible myopia and to demonstrate incredible ignorance.

16. Asia can no longer sit down and take injury and insult in stoic silence -- from those who think that their own complete lack of knowledge should be no impediment to putting entire countries on trial. We of Asia will increasingly demand and we have a right to demand a little maturity and sophistication on the part of those who wish to analyse and proselytise; who so easily slip into the role of policeman, prosecutor, judge and jury; who so habitually try, judge, punish and persecute without even giving a hearing.

17. What Asians need is not theology and the easy assumption that we cannot think for ourselves. Once upon a time we might have bought snake oil. But we are a little bit more sophisticated now. Too much water has flowed under the bridges of history. To those politicians and all-knowing NGOs who still want to sell snake oil, we say take some yourselves for you may need it more. We would like to point out that the oppression of nations by nations is no less undemocratic than the oppression of Governments over their citizens. You cannot preach one without practising the other.

18. Let me now turn to my call to American enterprise to 'Go West', to come out

in large numbers to what so many of you, and some of us, still call "the Far East". The Far East for America is actually Europe up to Asia Minor. The world is quite round as has been confirmed by satellite pictures. Any place can be the central reference point. Relative to America, Asia is the West. Even as you left the cosy comforts of home a century and a half ago and built the American West, you should now do the same but venture further, across the Pacific in fact and help build Asia. You will not have to deal with marauding natives and lose your scalps. You will be welcomed instead and you will gain more than you ever did when you pioneered the opening of your Wild West.

19. In the 21st century, no corporation can be a world player if it is not nourished by and strongly anchored in our part of the world. Already, the Asia Pacific is where 60 percent of the world is. On this planet, at this time, already 60 percent of all the goods and services produced is produced in the Asia Pacific. In the decades ahead, the economic centre of gravity must shift Westwards even as it did in America's own history only a hundred and fifty years ago.

20. To be sure, some of us in Asia may not want you and will not be prepared to ensure that you and you alone flourish and profit from your enterprise and our enormous dynamism. We would certainly want a share of that profit. That apart, let me say that in most of Asia Pacific and certainly in Malaysia you are most heartily welcome. We need you as co-builders of our co-prosperity. If you help us to prosper, then you would be building a great market for your goods and expertise, for no matter how we try there will always be things that we will need from you. No matter how much we want to be independent, we cannot help but be inter-dependent. We cannot only sell to you, we must buy also, as much as we realise you must sell in order to be able to buy what we want to sell to you. We know this and you know this.

21. Asians and Asian values are not identical. We differ quite a bit. Mostly we are polite and even accommodating. But sometimes we are not. So do not be surprised if the customarily polite becomes frank and the usually frankly brutal becomes nice and accommodating. If I may be allowed I would like to seriously advocate a joint venture between Asia and America and others in order to create a single global commonwealth. You see, we do believe in good friendly relations for the common good of mankind even.

22. A single interdependent global commonwealth was not possible in the great age of colonialism because the world was divided into exclusive economic blocs, each oriented towards its centre of the imperial cosmos. However, it is today possible for the first time in human history. Imagine the productive consequences of such a new economic reality. It will be the real mechanism which will transform the whole political, strategic and psychological make-up of the world. We would indeed have a new world.

23. In a previous dialogue I suggested that we opt for win-win-win solutions. I said that we should forever bury the primeval and primordial beggar-thy-neighbour reflexes that have been so natural in the past. Let us put in their place prosper-thy-neighbour impulses aimed at ensuring that all our neighbours and all

their neighbours, far and near, will prosper. Is it wrong for everyone to be prosperous? I am sure we have noticed that prosperous people have more time to attend to the well-being of human kind, their freedoms and their rights. Wouldn't a commonwealth of nations where wealth would really be common be better than wealth that is uncommon for most nations of the world?

24. There has been much talk of the 21st century becoming the Asian Century. I beg to differ.

25. I believe that the 21st century will not be the Asian Century in the way that the Nineteenth century was the European century and much of the 20th was the American century. The 21st century will be the century when the world takes precedence over the narrower interests of nations and continents. This will be best not only for the rest of the world but also for Asia.

26. But the century of the world will not happen if we all talk of the Asian Century. We should downplay this Asian Century thing. We should play up the 21st century as the Century of the world, the century when the world comes together, to build greater prosperity not only for Asians but for all mankind.

27. We Asians must forego the ego massage that so many others seem to need. The idea of Asians lording it over the rest of the world may seem attractive and satisfying for Asians. But let us not be lulled by this egoistic dream.

28. Yet we must surely want Asia to have a bigger say in the making of the 21st century. We cannot have a bigger say if we mess up our administrations through democratic irresponsibility, if we unnecessarily confront each other over trivialities, if we fail to seize the hour. How can we have a bigger say if we can't even make up our minds what to say?

29. If we are to command the respect of the world, we do truly need to do even better in the process towards modernisation. We must be more successful in devising systems of more democratic governance. We must advance faster, over a broader front, in the struggle to ensure the dignity of man, the dignity of all our citizens, their rights and responsibilities.

30. We have been able to secure the greatest advance of mankind in human history in the last generation because we were able to recognise what really counts is pragmatism, not ideological fervour; that the welfare of our people must take precedence over the egos of the few, and that that well-being can only come from economic growth, not jingoistic nationalism or even continentalism.

31. East Asian and Americans share a common Ocean, the Pacific, the Ocean of peace. It may have distanced us from each other in the past as the Atlantic never did between Europe and America. But that distance is no longer the dividing factor that it was. Where once it took months to cross today it takes a matter of hours. And we can talk and see each other as if there is no oceanic gap between us.

32. True, most wars have been between close neighbours. But neighbours have

been known to form strong and lasting alliances. Cannot we be friends, Asians and Americans? Cannot we be a little more tolerant of each other' s quirks and foibles? Stop comparing. Neither of us are perfect, nor either absolutely imperfect.

33. During this Pacific Dialogue you will be concentrating constructively on three subjects: Moving Forward on the Economic Front, Moving Forward on the Political Front, and Moving Forward on the Culture/Civilisation Front. To move forward together on any front, we need understanding and tolerance. Otherwise we will be moving forward against each other and there can only be a destructive clash in the end.

34. Almost one thousand years ago, as the world that was Europe then moved towards the end of the first millennium and the beginning of the second millennium, there was near panic and utter depression. This was because the learned Christian clerics of that time believed that the world would come to an end exactly one thousand years after the birth of Jesus Christ. Economic development wound down. Human endeavour petered out. For what was the use of doing anything positive if the world was going to come to an abrupt end?

35. Today, one thousand years later, we know better. We must seek a new beginning. Let our uncommon sense prevail. Let us build as determinedly as we can destroy.

36. If Asia and America can be joint venture partners in prospering each other we will surely be the catalyst for a single global commonwealth of common prosperity and this will surely result in a century that is not Asian, not American, nor European, nor even African, but a World Century. Idealistic perhaps. But Man, working towards an ideal must achieve something nearly that.