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"NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL COOPERATION"

ADDRESS BY

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AT A

CONFERENCE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS

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This meeting of Southeast Asian students in the United States is both a symptom and an opportunity. It is a symptom in that it bespeaks a new sense of belonging together among students from the various countries in Southeast Asia, that was absent in previous student generations. Insofar as they were organized, students from the various Southeast Asian nations in the United States used to keep very much to themselves, and apart from the usual kindness a foreigner shows another foreigner in a strange country, there was little contact and even less intellectual intercourse. This new attitude, this search for a deeper understanding of each other among Southeast Asian students in the United States, is an important step forward towards the kind of regional awareness without which regional cooperation will remain an empty slogan.

This meeting is also an opportunity. An opportunity to identify the problems that we have to face together in this new decade, if Southeast Asia is to stand on its own in the winds of change that affect the Southeast Asian region. It is also an opportunity to have a closer look at the international setting within which our countries will have to pursue their individual as well as their common destinies.

There is little doubt that the 1970s will be known as a period of transition. Transition towards a new phase in Southeast Asian history. A phase marked by fundamental changes in the constellation of external forces affecting the area. The disappearance of the last remnants of colonial power and the dissolution of a bipolar environment into a new multipolar equilibrium of external forces consisting of the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan and China.

External forces have always played an important role in the history of Southeast Asia. In many ways the history of the various countries in that area cannot be thought of but in terms of their cultural, commercial and in some cases political relations with the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and China. In all this, however, the indigenous element shaping history was always there and in the long run always dominant. It was with the event of colonialism from the sixteenth century on that that indigenous element increasingly lost its capacity to play a decisive role. By the end of the nineteenth century it was only Thailand that retained its national integrity and its freedom.

The Second World War brought an end to the European domination of Southeast Asia. After a brief period of Japanese military occupation during World War II, the emergence of new Southeast Asian independent states became very much tangled up in the vicissitudes of the East-West confrontation that was commonly called the Cold War. The dissolution of this pattern of bilateral confrontation between the communist and the capitalist bloc, the attainment of nuclear parity between the two super powers, the reduced military profile of the United States in Southeast Asia, and the emergence of the new constellation of forces in East Asia and the Western Pacific now compels the nations of Southeast Asia to position themselves anew in order to safeguard their basic interests of national survival, economic development and nation building. One conclusion they will inevitably draw is the importance that no single external power should be allowed to dominate the new constellation of forces. This reorientation will also lead to the awareness of the essential need for an indigenous Southeast Asian component to the new balance of forces. Unless this is achieved, there is very little hope that Southeast Asia can reduce or even become free of external

power entanglements in the area. Individually, the Southeast Asian countries are too weak. But together they just might develop the regional cohesion necessary for this kind of a Southeast Asian reassertion. In this way the era into which we are now moving then may not only mark the emergence of a new multipolar equilibrium of external forces, but also the emergence of a Southeast Asia that is coming into its own as an autonomous factor in the power equation.

Such self-assertion of the Southeast Asian nations in the 1970s is not only a possibility; it is a crucial necessity if we do not want our fate to be determined solely by the conflicting interests of the major external powers. Unless the countries in Southeast Asia develop the capacity to work together and to make their common presence felt in the fabric of international politics, the Southeast Asian countries individually may fall victim to external big power conflicts. And this will only perpetuate the divisions, the balkanization and the impotence of the region.

It is, of course, impossible to foresee the actual configuration of this new constellation of external forces. The nature of these forces and the direction, as well as the level of their interests, differ. The power of some of these forces is rooted in the strength of their nuclear and conventional weaponry. For others, in their GNP, the strength of their economy and technology, or in the size of their population and their ideological single-mindedness. Neither is it possible to make predictions about the strategic, political and economic posture these major powers will assume towards the Southeast Asian region, its problems, its aspirations, and its instabilities. What we can say with some degree of certainty is that, after the settlement of the Vietnam war, all the countries in Southeast Asia will have to make their adjustments to this new constellation of forces, to understand its dynamics, to identify the opportunities and problems implicit in this new configuration, and to determine their goals in this context. In order to do this it will be necessary to overcome a number of conceptual and structural obstacles in all our countries. For more than twenty years many of our problems have customarily been couched in cold war terms, often because of the need to pressure either side or both sides in the cold war into giving our nations the kind of economic or military assistance that our countries felt they needed. This cold war pitch obscured for many of us in Southeast Asia the primarily indigenous character of many of our social and political problems within our countries. Also, the bilateral confrontation between the capitalist and the communist bloc had led to the growth of patterns of vested interests in a number of our countries, exploiting the relationship of dependency on external forces engaged in this bilateral confrontation. The dissolution of the simple dichotomy of the cold war and the emergence of a more intricate constellation of external forces impinging on the Southeast Asian area, forces us therefore - insofar as that has not already taken place - to do away with the cold war vocabulary of the past and to formulate our problems and our needs in our own terms, in terms that are relevant to our real situation, our history and our goals, and not cut to suit the interests, obsessions or idiosyncrasies of the external powers. This also means the need for a redefinition of our position and our interests in this context and a reformulation of the goals that we must pursue. But above all, it

means developing the political and psychic maturity that will be required if we are to play out our destinies in freedom and in dignity.

In a strange way, our attempts to prepare ourselves for the future force us to look for that which has been indigenous and continuous in our history, and to look at our own societies in terms of their indigenous potentials and of their inherent capability to push forward towards new goals. In doing so we cannot avoid realizing the plethora of problems and their magnitude, with which our countries were saddled in the wake of the decolonization process. Whatever the various political systems that each of our countries has at the moment, it is only realistic to be aware of the weakness of our political institutions, and their limited capacity to cope with these problems. The legacy of border disputes, ethnical or communal strife, social inequalities, ignorance and backwardness. It is also clear that unless we can - each in his own way - overcome the endemic poverty that is part of the reality of life in all our countries, these problems will remain insoluble. Nation building and rapid economic development therefore are the fundamental preconditions for the survival of our nations. All this means change, accelerated change, often painful change. Change in our economic structures, as well as cultural change, so that rapid economic development will become possible; change in our political systems, so that the new drives, the new impulses for growth can be accommodated; that racial and communal minorities can be integrated and that the political base of our systems can be broadened continually so as to encompass the new dynamic elements that emerge in our societies. All our political systems, whatever their label, democratic, militaristic, or communistic, will be tested in this decade as to their nation building capacity as well as to their capacity for effectuating rapid economic change. They will also be tested for their capacity to achieve these twin goals in a relatively orderly way and in a way that will reduce - and not increase - glaring social inequalities in our society. Without nation building, without economic development and especially without the will and determination to bring this about, none of our Southeast Asian nations may survive as we know them now.

To develop this capability is the major task that lies ahead. We will also have to prepare ourselves to live for quite some time into the future with some degree of instability, for change inevitably leads to instability. Standing still, however, is suicidal, and the defense of the status quo will only aggravate the suddenness and violence of change.

It is of the greatest importance that in developing our understanding of each other and each other's troubles and aspirations, we, who live in the various countries of Southeast Asia, realize the necessity as well as the inevitability of change in each of our societies. And that therefore we develop the capability to continue cooperating with each other regionally without being unduly perturbed by these changes as they occur. Our vehicles for regional cooperation should develop the capability to accommodate such changes. Certainly the difference in political systems or the labels attached to these systems should not be a deterrent to regional cooperation. Nor should the existence of traditional fears, rivalries and border disputes or simply lack of

communication inherited from the colonial past prevent or retard the development of regional cooperation. It should be possible to develop the necessary mechanisms for conflict resolution and in this way to avoid deflecting our meager resources towards a regional armaments race. An understanding of the overriding urgency for the welding of such a Southeast Asian component in the new balance of forces and hence of the need to settle once and for all the traditional disputes between our countries, as well as to accept as a matter of course changes within our societies, is therefore of the greatest importance.

Such understanding, institutionalized within the regional framework, will also reduce the inclination of the external powers to use or exploit these disputes and these changes in order to strengthen their own position in the constellation of forces. It will be necessary to make the external powers understand the indigenous character of many of the changes that will take place in the area as well as their inevitability. It is not only we, the peoples of Southeast Asia, who must learn to live with instability, but the major powers as well. Outside intervention will only aggravate the problems and the instabilities and will only trigger commensurate interventions from the other external forces. It therefore becomes very important that in assessing the problems of the area and in determining the steps that they should take, the external powers increasingly take into account the way in which these problems are perceived by the people themselves, shorn of the adornments and distortions resulting from the phraseology of the cold war. And the more this is done, the less the countries in Southeast Asia will look like lifeless dominoes. The future of Southeast Asian stability lies in the economic development and the modernization of the Southeast Asian states as well as in their capability to make regional cooperation effective. This is the fundamental task that faces us.

The perspective that I have tried to develop here also has some implications for those Southeast Asians who are privileged to study here. Its relevance has not so much to do with the needs of today, but with the opportunities of tomorrow. The most important thing, of course, is that after you have finished your studies, you return to your country. For this, among other things, it will be necessary for you not to specialize yourselves, consciously or unconsciously, out of the job market back home. But in a more general sense, I should say that it is incumbent upon Southeast Asian students in the United States not to look at themselves as narrow specialists and technocrats whose skills are needed by their country and who, therefore, expect to be treated accordingly, but always as builders of their countries in a broader sense than the limits of their field of specialization. If you look at yourselves in this manner, you will be less easily discouraged if and when upon returning home you find that the institutional framework within which your expertise could be applied is lacking. From this broader perspective it becomes clear that creating the technological and institutional preconditions for the efficient application of your skills will often be a job you yourselves will have to do, as one of your contributions to the nation building process. Secondly, it is important that you should develop an understanding of the overall process of nation building and economic development, its problems, the structural changes required, and the place of one's field of specialization

in the general thrust for development and modernization. This understanding will allow you to work more effectively and with fewer frustrations when you return to your country. This will also help you to determine your broader role, not merely as a specialist, but as an agent of development in the process of modernization and nation building. Thirdly, generally the Southeast Asian student should become more aware and even specialize in the problems of the Southeast Asian region, or in one or more of the Southeast Asian countries. There is, of course, some degree of irony in the fact that it is easier to do that here in the United States than in Southeast Asia itself. In this connection it is important to develop not only an awareness of the domestic problems of the countries in the area, their historical roots and the various shapes they have taken over time, but also of how external forces impinge on the area. This will automatically lead him to an understanding of how regional cooperation could reduce the scope for external forces to play one Southeast Asian country off against another, or to exploit one nation in the power game against other external forces, both leading to continued dependency.

The future of Southeast Asia, then, will very much depend on our capacity to develop a new elite that is committed to economic development and nation building with a strong regional awareness; an elite that is sensitized to each of our countries' problems, hopes, fears and aspirations. By working towards this goal while studying here, we will be contributing to the emergence of Southeast Asia, after so many centuries, as an autonomous factor in a new equilibrium of forces. And this will lay the foundation for a new Southeast Asia finally coming into its own. This is the challenge of the 1970s for us in our part of the world.