

*Lee Kuan Yew*

## Southeast Asia:

# 'The End of an Era'

*Lee Kuan Yew, prime minister of Singapore, delivered the following address April 7 to the New Zealand National Press Club:*

I am not going to talk about dominoes. I have never played the game. Nor do I think it an appropriate figure of speech for the tragedy we are witnessing in South Vietnam and Cambodia. What is happening there is having a profound effect on the minds of other in Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia's immediate neighbors, the Thais.

The Nixon Doctrine, announced in Guam in 1969, that America will materially help those who are ready to help themselves, died with Watergate. Everyone knew that no American soldier would ever fight a guerrilla in Asia after the Paris agreement of January 1973 allowed the Americans to disengage with honor. By August 1973, the American Congress has interdicted their President from using American bombers in Southeast Asia without congressional approval.

Nixon resigned in August 1974. There has been no time to spell out a Ford Doctrine. But he did try to define his aid policy on South Vietnam, namely three more years of military and economic aid before a final cutoff. We knew that the American Congress did not agree with their President.

The new Thai prime minister has now publicly asked American forces to leave within a year. Since American forces cannot help them on land or in the air, the Thais might as well make a virtue of requesting an American military withdrawal. From a symbol of power and security, they have become obstacles to a change in posture, which must precede a change of relationships with the other great powers.

I doubt if any Thai government, civilian or military, will want to be engaged in the kind of guerrilla insurgency that has crushed Cambodia and South Vietnam. Rather than go through that mincing machine, it makes more sense to seek political and diplomatic solutions. Adjustment and accommodation to changed circumstances are necessary. Thais and others in Southeast Asia know that the patience and perseverance of Americans have not matched that of the Communists, not simply Communists in Vietnam, but also their suppliers,

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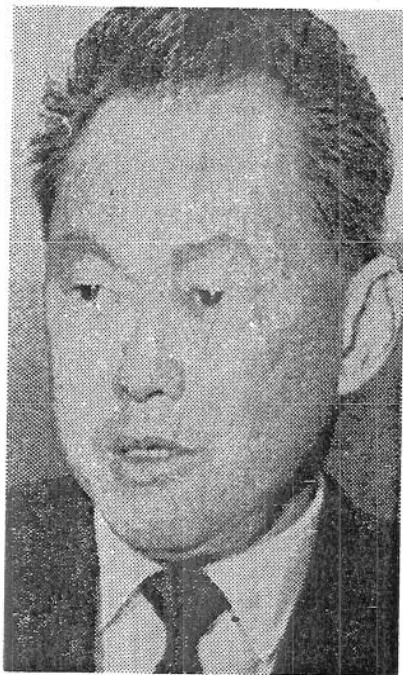
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the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. Since the Thais are unlikely to be able to make amends to the North Vietnamese for the damage which the American B52s, using air bases in Thailand, have caused, it will be easier for them to befriend China than North Vietnam. After all, Thailand did no harm to China. In any case, the Chinese have shown themselves to be more reliable friends, to judge from their support of what once looked the hopeless cause of Prince Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge.

The rest of Southeast Asia will have to live with whatever political accommodation the Thais make. Fortunately, Thailand has ample time to work out what is in her best interests, for the

North Vietnamese will take many years to mend a war-shattered Vietnam before undertaking further adventure in helping Thai insurgents. And the Khmer Rouge or GRUNK, the acronym for Prince Sihanouk's government, will be busy not only repairing the shattered economy of Cambodia and her displaced people, but also preventing the Vietnamese Communists from becoming the dominant influence over their country. In fact, Prince Sihanouk took elaborate pains to state that Cambodia's number one friend will always be the People's Republic of China. If Khieu Sam Phan and any other Khmer Rouge leaders share this view, then Hanoi's capacity for aiding and abetting insurgency may not reach Thailand other than through Laos to the northeast of Thailand.

Thailand's southern neighbor, Peninsular Malaysia, has a completely different situation. Malaysia's guerrilla movement has always been, and still is, led by ethnic Chinese. For a Com-



munist insurgency to succeed, the rebels must throw up Malay leaders to have a better ethnic balance in the leadership. Only in this way can they get more representative support from the ground. While this is not impossible, it will take a very long time, if it can be done at all.

An era has come to an end. America was the dominant power in Southeast Asia for 30 years since the end of World War II. Once America acknowledged that she could no longer intervene in Southeast Asia, it is fair to assume that the contest for influence over the peoples in the region will be mainly between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, both of whom openly avow their duty to help Communists everywhere and to promote revolution. The fate of Southeast Asian countries is to be caught in a competitive clash between these two.

China has the advantage of historic associations with the region. Memories of past tributes paid and an awareness of geographical proximity make all in Southeast Asia anxious not to take sides with the Soviet Union against the Chinese, even though the Soviet Union is ahead on military technology. Most hope to maintain equal relations with both China and the Soviet Union. But this may not be possible unless these two Communist centers cease to compete for ideological and nationalist supremacy—a prospect which appears remote.

Meanwhile, a continuing American naval presence and increased economic relations will help the rest of Southeast Asia to adjust less abruptly and to make the task of learning to live with a Communist Indochina less painful.