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INTERNATIONAL
SECURITY AFFAIRS

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301

In reply refer to:
I-22749/75

333 Singapore

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Call by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (U)

Participants:

United States

Secretary of Defense - James R. Schlesinger
Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA) - Robert Ellsworth
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA) - Morton I. Abramowitz
Military Assistant to the SecDef - MajGen John A. Wickham, Jr.
Director, East Asia & Pacific Region, OASD(ISA) - RADM William J. Crowe
Assistant for Singapore, EA&PR, OASD(ISA) - CAPT Lennart G. Holmberg, USN

Singapore

Prime Minister - Lee Kuan Yew
Foreign Minister - Sinnathamby Rajaratnam
Private Secretary to PM - A. Sankaran

Time: 1430 - 1600, 9 May 1975

Place: Secretary of Defense's office, Pentagon

1. (S) After introductions and pleasantries, PM Lee began by expressing his shock and dismay at the collapse in Cambodia and Vietnam, indicating that they had occurred much faster than he had thought possible. SECDEF asked if PM Lee had anticipated the collapse and he answered yes, he had anticipated Cambodia, but not Vietnam, certainly not so sudden and so complete. He was appalled at the absolute breakdown of morale, discipline and leadership, and felt that it was criminal to abandon such large amounts of weapons without using them. He indicated that it would have been better to fight and die than to run away from their own country. "How could they live with themselves?"

2. (S) PM Lee has little faith in the Thai but hopes that the top people in the government are willing at least for the next 3-5 years to do everything in their power to avoid a situation like Cambodia or Laos. There is no doubt that Chatchai is an overwrought man and that many of his utterances are made under stress. PM Lee advised us to play it cool and discount

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60-70% of what the Thai say. He thinks that the PRC is playing for time; the more time the less it will cost them. Eventually they will arrive at the price they are willing to pay for control of the Northern Malay Peninsula. He noted that when the PRC received Razak, the Malay communist party became isolated. PM Lee believes the North Vietnamese could move all the way to Singapore. "We (the Singaporeans) don't believe the U.S. would make a move, but we do believe the PRC would, and that is what is protecting us." (PM Lee stated that perhaps he should be in China instead of Washington.) SECDEF then commented that American public opinion is very volatile.

3. (S) PM Lee outlining his views on the ability of the U.S. to retain its influence in SEA, made the following points.

- Between now and the next U.S. election, don't lose anymore pieces.
- The President's word will not carry any weight unless it is backed by Congress.
- The Senate Foreign Relations Committee now has a new and important status.

4. (S) PM Lee commented that Marcos and the Thai are playing to a scared audience. Laos cannot be compared to Cambodia and Vietnam -- the latter two are exporters, Laos is not. Thai Lao and Pathet Lao cannot be distinguished. The competition in Laos will be between the Soviet Union and North Vietnam; PRC will not move in nor will the U.S.

5. (S/S) PM Lee then stated that he had some specific items to discuss: first, that he needed parts for radios that were being co-produced in Singapore by the Israeli's (PRC/77's are being produced) and that certain components were needed but were delayed in the munitions control process. SECDEF said we would try to provide it. PM Lee next discussed several items which will be disseminated to appropriate offices within OSD.

6. (S) PM Lee discussed in rambling detail the pleasant way of life in Singapore and how he had made mortal enemies out of the communists. On several occasions during the course of the conversation he discussed the withdrawal of Singapore from Malaysia and how his government has demonstrated the effectiveness of honest government and how this contrasts with other Asian states. PM Lee then concluded that it is imperative for the Malays to counter communist influence by becoming more like Singapore. In his opinion the primary threat is the Malay communist element which is centered in Thailand on the border of Malaysia. He commented that if somehow they could take the communists by surprise, they could clean out the hard core. SECDEF asked what that number would be. PM Lee replied that it was 2,000 to 4,000.

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7. (S) SECDEF asked what was the role of Thai military? PM Lee indicated that they will do nothing until the King is ready. SECDEF then asked if their military was incapable of action. PM Lee thought so. SECDEF questioned what North Vietnam was going to do in the next 6 months to 1 year. PM Lee predicted that they will be nice for awhile, noting that they will have time to kill later. He then added that Cambodia does not have the same confidence as the Viets.

8. (S) SECDEF asked several questions regarding the Indonesians. PM Lee indicated that Indonesia is not strong because of such things as its internal corruption and the extravagance of Mrs. Suharto, which, combined with indications of lack of support by the populace is not encouraging. They are trying to get all non-Javanese to be loyal to Jakarta, but they do not have the integrity and confidence that is required. SECDEF asked why Indonesian troops could not be put into Malaysia to help stem the communist tide. PM Lee pointed out that it would not work and could be counter-productive as Indonesian troops, used to living off the land, would be doing so at the expense of the Malaysians. PM Lee then stated that "it takes time to move from bullock cart to jet age."

9. (S) PM Lee then spoke of the Muslim conflict in the Philippines. In his opinion it would destroy Marcos unless he stopped it from draining his treasury. He indicated that the war stopped Marcos from making any progress in spite of the fact that he had an increased income from sugar and other commodities. SECDEF inquired about the logisitcs base of the Muslims in the Philippines. Lee answered by suggesting that Marcos stop pursuing the Muslims and instead set up enclaves and merely wait them out.

10. (S) Finally, the SECDEF asked, "Why did U.S. lose in Vietnam?" PM Lee responded that there are many reasons; "Let's not go back to Genesis, let's go to April '73. If you didn't have Watergate, this wouldn't have happened. Thieu was to visit me, and I was going to tell him that if he was not able to tell the U.S. Congress he would need less and less, he would scare the investors away." Thieu should have dealt with the VC; then he could have hung on for years and possibly retained the confidence of the Congress.

11. (S) PM Lee's final point was that we need 100 to 150 key leaders in the area to be convinced that we are going in the right direction and who are willing to make the sacrifices to fight the communists. This requires honest, concerned and efficient governments and leaders who are not self-serving.

Memorandum of Conversation
Prepared by: CAPT Holmberg

Approved by: 

Date: 5/20/75

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