

SEATO COUNCIL MEETING

CANBERRA, A. C. T.

Speech by the Prime Minister Mr. Harold Holt.

27th JUNE, 1966.



Mr. Prime Minister, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour for me to be asked to open the 1966 SEATO Conference. I extend a warm welcome to you all on behalf of the Australian Government and people. This welcome embraces not only the distinguished Foreign Ministers and delegations of countries with which we enjoy close and constructive relations both in SEATO and outside of it, but also the distinguished Secretary-General, General Vargas, and staff of the Organization.

Australia has become more conscious in recent times that, through geography, trade and circumstance, we are increasingly part of the Asian scene. Australia has good cause to value the existence of SEATO. It has been a solid pillar of security for us. We have faithfully honoured our own commitments to our colleagues of the Organization, and we are grateful for the support given to SEATO's purposes by those members of the Organization who have made much more massive contributions than our own.

There has been a good deal of debate and talk about a domino theory in Asia. This theory propounds the view that if one country of South-East Asia succumbs to Communist aggression, the others will topple in turn. We can claim, from its achievements, that SEATO has successfully applied the domino theory in reverse. It has brought us an assurance of combined support. We, and others of the area, have lived much more securely because of its existence. We have been able to plan more confidently for an expanding future. We have done so encouraged by the fact that SEATO provides a shield of protection and a means of constructive collaboration.

The Asian countries of SEATO have been able to build their defences and to strengthen their economies. The year under review provides further heartening proof to that supplied in other recent years that those countries of Asia under Communist threat can, with outside help supplementing their own efforts, meet that challenge and proceed to prosperous economic growth. We can point to countries of the region, some of them members of this Organization, which have recorded notable gains of economic and social progress and are now advancing to new levels of achievement in an environment of stability. To those of us who live in the area there is inspiration in the visible evidences of improvement and progress. Some countries that I have visited recently seem transformed against my recollections of them in earlier years.

What is also heartening has been the emergence of positive and constructive attitudes to international instrumentalities for economic co-operation. Although national sovereignty has been attained by some only within the last 20 years, they display a commendable readiness to work with others and create the institutions for co-operation. The newly constituted Asian and Pacific Council and the Asian Development Bank are welcome examples. We have welcomed also the generous undertaking by the President of the United States to make a billion dollar contribution towards economic development in South-East Asia. Developments such as these inspire a spirit of hope more widely felt throughout the whole region. Even in the heat of military contest in South Vietnam, there are practical programmes being evolved for better times ahead.

We are all conscious of a ferment of change in the Asia of today. The restlessness and the turbulence give rise to the more dramatic episodes which are widely publicised. But these are only aspects of dynamic forces, some of them much more favourable in their influence, shaping movements in human affairs which in turn can affect the whole world.

SEATO has its critics and, of course, it has its imperfections. But the fact is that since its formation, it has held Communism at bay. From South Vietnam, one of the SEATO protocol states, where the thrust of aggression has been fiercest, we are now receiving much more hopeful reports. But while we have strengthened the foundations of our security, the need for SEATO remains as strong as ever. No region today contains greater dangers for world peace and security than Asia. South-East Asia has been singled out by the Communists as a critical area of challenge. They believe that if their technique of so-called wars of national liberation can succeed in South Vietnam, it can be employed with similar success in many other countries.

Why did the SEATO Treaty come into existence? It was designed to enable its member countries to combine together to counter the Communist threat in Asia. It was built on the reality that, left to themselves the countries of the area would fall to Communist pressures. It recognises that these pressures can take many forms. They vary in intensity, and they require a variety of responses. Thanks to SEATO the Governments of member countries can expect assistance, not only when declared conventional military attack occurs across their frontiers, but also they can look for assistance when their authority and administration are under assault from those familiar Communist instruments - subversion and guerrilla warfare.

Communist aggression in South-East Asia follows what has become a clear pattern. It usually begins covertly. There is long underground preparation. This includes political indoctrination, the training of cadres and the build up of secret sources of supply. The initial threats are indirect. They are concealed and they mature slowly.

The response made by the SEATO allies must therefore, be carefully devised. There must be armed strength, of course, but we cannot win an enduring victory by military means alone. There is the battle to be won for the people's support, and to win this there must be political, social, administrative and economic measures acceptable to them.

On my recent visit to South-East Asia, it was of special interest to me to discover how earnestly the positive constructive tasks directed to a better way of life in the community were being promoted. Whether in South Vietnam, Malaysia or Thailand, I found that the Government concerned had turned its attention to this need for a positive, constructive programme of civic action and rural development. It is to be found to a growing extent among the programmes of the military forces of all the countries concerned. Our own Australian forces, wherever situated give a high priority to their activities in this field. No doubt we have a long way to go, but the processes are under way.

A notable feature of SEATO is that each member country retains its freedom of action about how best it can make a contribution. This flexibility is important because the problems that we face are neither simple nor clear cut. SEATO has shown itself capable of adapting itself speedily and effectively to handling the different phases of tactics and timing of the Communist challenge in Asia. We know, for example, that faced with military reverses, the Communists are likely to step up their well known tactics of subversion, infiltration, terrorism and sabotage.

SEATO, of course does not stand alone as the sole instrument for security in Asia and the Pacific region. Several members of SEATO belong to other arrangements which help to fortify the SEATO structure and the fabric of security in the region. These arrangements are, for the most part, formally established and contribute greatly to the common defence in the region of Asia and the Pacific. The countries of the free world associated in SEATO have shown their capacity to defend national sovereignty and integrity.

Successive Communist challenges in Asia have failed. They have been met by the military strength of the Government under attack. It has been supported by the military forces, logistical backing and economic strength of its partners, and of other friendly forces also.

The major challenge of Communism in Asia today is directed to South Vietnam, as I have said. But it has met growing and determined strength of resistance.

SEATO is not merely an instrument for military security. Its purposes include the advancement of all in the regions it serves. It is well constituted to help by practical assistance and friendly guidance. SEATO has enabled us to exercise strength through combination. This is of great importance to the smaller powers which are helped in this way to devote more of their resources to economic growth. Australia in common with some other members of the Organization, has made your problems of development as well as those of defence. Left to ourselves, we would be overburdened and crippled with security costs. The existence of SEATO and other security arrangements ensures that members who are most directly threatened and who are the least able to afford large military establishments will neither perish nor impoverish themselves.

The wisdom, ability and experience assembled here should enable this conference to advance most usefully the purposes of the Organization.

The ultimate answer to Communism must be found in the minds of the people. They must feel convinced that life has meaning, promise and better standards for them. We who oppose Communism must be more than anti-Communist. We must demonstrate the false attractions of Communist ideology and expose its techniques of human manipulation. But we must stand together for the satisfaction of decent human aspirations and the precious enjoyment of individual liberty.

Your SEATO labours of today will do much to shape the Asia of tomorrow. I wish you fruitful and successful meetings.

I formally declare the conference open.