

TRENDS IN REGIONAL ASSOCIATION IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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SOUTH EAST ASIA, THE AREA SITUATED TO THE EAST OF THE Indian sub-continent and south of China, enjoys a debatable regional coherence. Although it is possible to postulate its geographical identity in terms of common features,¹ South East Asia is essentially an expression of convenience for a zone of extreme human diversity. The Chinese (with *Nan yang*) and the Japanese (with *Nan yo*) had a traditional holistic view of South East Asia, a term which came into Western usage only during the Second World War to specify a theater of military operations within part of the Japanese occupied area. Today, South East Asia includes Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, both Vietnams, Malaysia Indonesia and the Philippines.² The present governments of these countries pay scant regard to the convention of South East Asia as a unity, and their actions demonstrate little desire to translate sporadic utterances about regionalism into practical forms. At the same time, there has been no indication of any popular urge for regional association.

South East Asia presents a kaleidoscopic aspect and there is little reward in searching for features common to all countries of the area and which may, therefore, be said to contribute to their collective sense of regional consciousness. Indeed, one is bound to agree with the historian who acknowledged the impossibility of "subsuming South East Asia in terms of an integral civilization, like those of India, China, Korea, and Japan."³ But even where affinity exists—as between some of the countries—political considerations weigh more heavily than say, cultural bonds. Relations between Thailand and Cambodia and between Indonesia and Malaysia are cases in point.

A common experience of colonialism is sometimes nominated as the unifying tie in South East Asia, Thailand excepted. But colonialism in South East Asia, although common to the region, was not of one variety

¹ Charles A. Fisher, *South-East Asia, A Social, Economic and Political Geography* (London, 1964), pp. 5-7.

² One should include also the British Protectorate of Brunei, an enclave within the Borneo territory of Malaysia, the Portuguese possession on the island of Timor and with the Indonesian assumption of power in West Irian, the island of New Guinea.

³ H. Benda, "The Structure of South East Asian History," *Journal of South East Asian History* (March, 1962), p. 108.

and, therefore, not exactly a shared experience. The various colonial systems each established their own distinctive imprint and left their own peculiar legacy. Colonialism in South East Asia was never a uniform condition; nor was its impact uniform. Colonialism, however, did consolidate the fragmentary character of the region and set up political barriers which shaped the pattern of national succession. It also established ties with metropolitan territories which have proved, in most cases, peculiarly resilient. The end of colonialism did not see a removal of so-called artificial barriers impeding regional coalescence—either the division of the colonial inheritance into states which had historic claims to territoriality (as in Mainland South East Asia) or the territorial extent of the colonial dominion used as the rationale of national legitimacy (as with Indonesia). In no case did a new state incorporate territory which had come formerly under the jurisdiction of more than one colonial authority.⁴

The Japanese occupation interrupted colonial rule and brought a brief regional, though not administrative, unity. But in this period, no enthusiasm was demonstrated for independence on this basis, although Indonesian nationalists viewed their claims within a wider context than the territorial limits of the Netherlands East Indies.

There is a sense, however, in which colonialism did lead to a uniform condition. The aftermath of colonialism saw the emergence in South East Asia of independent states asserting sovereign rights. This marked an attempt to realize Western ideas about nationalism within the framework of a western model—the nation-state. This development, too often neglected particularly in the West where it is taken for granted, focused priorities in terms of territorial national interest. At the same time, the establishment of independent states meant that diplomatic vehicles were created which could be exploited to satisfy not only national demands but also the ambitions and special interests of elite-groups in control of the various national movements. For them, the desire to participate in managing and representing a state, especially in its inter-national relations has proved to be long lasting. And there has been little sign of any willingness to sacrifice these perquisites of power for the sake of some wider form of association. The existence of a quasi-international community, with its dramatic stage at the United Nations, has permitted national actors to aspire to world roles; for some, the Cold War has exaggerated their sense of international importance. In this context, they tend to become conscious of the benefits of continued separate political identity as well as the true extent of their differences with regional associates. In-

⁴ One minor exception is the Turtle Islands which were transferred from British to Philippine jurisdiction in 1948.

deed, the opportunity to operate on the international stage has provided a means to demonstrate newly acquired independence, to discredit domestic opposition as anti-national, as well as to distract popular attention from closely defined domestic policy issues.

South East Asia is, by no means, a unique example of the contraverting of ideas about the passing of the nation-state. It is expecting too much among those who enjoy the benefits of separate territoriality in both new and old states, that they should voluntarily relinquish positions of eminence unless there is an assured opportunity for even greater distinction. This writer is not so cynical as to believe that exceptions to this suggested general pattern could not arise. However, the experience of South East Asia, since the Second World War, has been to discourage optimism on this score.

Until very recently, all practical schemes of association have not been exclusive to South East Asia. The two notable examples—the Colombo Plan and the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (E.C.A.F.E.)—are both useful ventures in limited economic cooperation, but they have made little contribution to regional integration. The former is an instrument by means of which specific forms of economic assistance are provided on a bilateral basis in accord with the generosity of donor countries and the expressed needs of recipient countries. It also provides for technical and other training in educational institutions of the donor countries. The actual Colombo Plan Bureau is no more than a coordinating office for the bilateral arrangements which are the plans in operation.⁵ The latter, *i.e.*, E.C.A.F.E., which places much less emphasis on the provision of material economic assistance, has had most success in multilateral collaboration in the collection of economic data, the exchange of statistical information, the adoption of uniform standards, and in the planning stages of developmental infrastructures. E.C.A.F.E. however, because of its multilateral functioning, has experienced considerable difficulty (in spite of a zealous secretariat) in advancing the degree of economic cooperation much beyond the formalistic level.⁶ A notable exception has been the Mekong River Scheme where, significantly, all the riparian states stand to gain equally.⁷ However, for the most part, the problems of economic development facing the

⁵ A useful account of this organization is to be found in L. P. Singh, *The Colombo Plan: Some Political Aspects* (Department of International Relations, Australian National University, Canberra, 1963).

⁶ See David Wightman, "Efforts for Economic Co-operation in Asia and the Far East," *The World Today* (January, 1962). Also, L. P. Singh, "E.C.A.-F.E.'s 18th Session in Tokyo," *Australia's Neighbours* (April-May, 1962).

⁷ See C. Hart Schaff and Russell H. Fifield, *The Lower Mekong* (Princeton, 1963).

countries of South East Asia remain to be solved on the basis of individual, rather than cooperative, effort.

The experience of political association has been even less fruitful. Here, the Cold War has been an intrusive dividing factor. The Baguio Conference of May 1950, for example, arose from an unequivocal initiative by President Quirino of the Philippines to foster an anti-Communist coalition in the aftermath of successful revolution in China. These plans misfired because of neutralist inhibitions and the occasion became instead one for pious platitudes which tended to disguise its original purpose.

The South East Asia Treaty Organization (S.E.A.T.O.) set up at Manila in September 1954 under American sponsorship was, perhaps, a more honest anti-Communist enterprise. However, its formation and its composition became factors of regional and wider discord. Neutralist countries tended, with some justification, to see S.E.A.T.O. as a colonial construct. With only Thailand and the Philippines as legitimate regional adherents, it was not difficult either to misunderstand or to misrepresent the purpose of the organization. Recurrent crises in Indo-China and parallel demonstrations of disunity within its ranks have also challenged S.E.A.T.O.'s adequacy as an alliance. The moment of truth for S.E.A.T.O. came in March 1962 with the American assurance to Thailand that her obligations to defend her S.E.A.T.O. partner did not depend upon the prior agreement of all the other parties to the treaty.⁸ The necessity for such an assurance would seem to be conclusive evidence of a serious breakdown in S.E.A.T.O.'s consultative machinery. Thailand may have been given renewed confidence in the willingness of the United States to come to her assistance in an emergency. In so doing, however, the United States pointedly reserved her use of S.E.A.T.O. as a vehicle for the defense of vital interests in South East Asia. The following May brought the fiasco at Nam Tha, in Northern Laos, when the Royal Army was routed; the United States, ostensibly to counter a threat from across the Mekong, sent troops into Thailand on the basis of its unilateral interpretation of obligations under the Manila Pact. This step was taken without allied consultation and token forces dispatched subsequently by Britain, Australia and New Zealand owed their presence to bilateral arrangements with the Thai government. S.E.A.T.O., for its part, has shown no potential for fostering regional, or any other kind of unity. Indeed, present consensus within the organization appears to exist only on the basis of opposition to a fellow member's uncrystallized proposal for neutralization in South East Asia.

⁸ This assurance, by Secretary of State Rusk, is to be found in a joint statement with Thai Foreign Secretary Thanat Khoman made 6th March, 1962. See George Modelski (ed.), *S.E.A.T.O.: Six Studies* (Melbourne, 1962), pp. 293-294.

The Asian-African Conference at Bandung in April 1955 was an attempt, among other things, to make neutralism and peaceful coexistence respectable and to welcome China into the community of new nations. To an extent, it proved to be a successful venture, if only of passing significance. But just because the venue of the conference was in South East Asia, one can hardly draw conclusions about regional association. Bandung's relevance was extra-regional as it related to Indian optimism in dealings with China. The sight of India leading a somewhat penitent China into the Afro-Asian community is incongruous viewed from the perspective of autumn 1962. However, the Bandung Conference appeared to make sense in 1955. Bandung—perhaps more than any subsequent similar occasion, except the United Nations General Assembly of 1960—demonstrated the benefits accruing to those who have a visible stake in the perpetuation of the state system. The sequel to Bandung (certain to be more Afro-Asian than Asian-African) to be held in Africa sometime in 1965 is just as likely to reproduce these features.

The institutions and events considered up to now, represent milestones for some. This may be so, but they have relevance to the subject of this article only to demonstrate their irrelevance as stages in regional development.

Strictly speaking, the first and, so far, only example of moderate success in regional association within South East Asia took place in July 1961. Then, Malaya, the Philippines and Thailand—after a false start with S.E.A.F.E.T. (South East Asian Friendship and Economic Treaty)—set up the Association of South East Asian States (A.S.A.). S.E.A.F.E.T. was proposed first in January 1959 when the Malayan Prime Minister paid a visit to the Philippines. The following October, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in a letter to President Garcia, announced his intention of writing to the Presidents of Indonesia and South Vietnam and the Prime Ministers of Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand to inform them of what he had in view. However, the lukewarm response—with the exception of Thailand, which verged on hostility from some neutralist leaders⁹—led to revised and more limited plans emerging as A.S.A. This association was ostensibly launched as a non-political cooperative enterprise, independent in every way from any power bloc or military alliance. Its declared aims were limited to economic and cultural association. Yet, despite such disclaimers about its purpose, there was little doubt that the endeavor marked an attempt to achieve political solidarity between countries with a similar

⁹ For example, the Cambodian response was "Our government believes that to create what might become a shadow S.E.A.T.O. would be quite disastrous." *Cambodian Commentary* (January, 1960), p. 4.

outlook on international issues. Thailand and the Philippines were members of S.E.A.T.O., while Malaya was linked militarily with three S.E.A.T.O. allies. In February 1961, when the S.E.A.F.E.T. idea was resurrected as A.S.A., at a meeting of foreign ministers in Kuala Lumpur, much concern was being expressed over the prospects of an imminent Communist takeover in Laos.

Even before the dispute over Malaysia had produced a serious cleavage within A.S.A., the Association had been working at a low level of activity. There had appeared to be little desire on the part of the governments involved to press ahead with ambitious schemes of cooperation. This served, perhaps intentionally, to keep it out of the international political limelight and to avoid the denigration from Moscow and Peking which its initial appearance evoked. Its modest scale of operations were less offensive also to governments within South East Asia who were regarded as potential members but who saw in A.S.A. an invidious extension of S.E.A.T.O. A.S.A., however, has not yet demonstrated any potential for growth and has passed most of its short existence as a divided house. Although discord between Malaysia and the Philippines has moderated to the extent that the Philippines has assumed the role of mediator in the dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia, the question of the disposition of North Borneo remains still to be settled. While one would not expect A.S.A. to vanish altogether from the South East Asian scene, its prospects, even within its original limited framework, are poor. And, in view of the shock to its functioning brought on by the Malaysia dispute, it cannot be expected, at least in the foreseeable future, to have more than a very modest existence.

Within Maritime South East Asia, the concept of a "Malaysia" has never been the basis for accord among prospective members beyond a vaguely accepted notion of association between peoples of ethnically related Malay origin. The idea, however, has enjoyed periodic currency, and in the latter stages of the Second World War, the prospect of Indonesian independence aroused expectations of its fulfillment, in the context of association with the Malay Peninsula and the British possessions in North Borneo.¹⁰

¹⁰ Evidence of this can be found in Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Some Aspects of Indonesian Politics under the Japanese Occupation*, Interim Report Series, Modern Indonesia Project (Cornell, 1961). William Roff, "Kaum Muda—Kaum Tua: Innovation and Reaction Amongst the Malays 1900-41," and Yoichi Itagaki, "Some Aspects of the Japanese Policy for Malaya Under the Occupation, With Special Reference to Nationalism," both in K. G. Tregonning (ed.), *Papers in Malayan History* (Singapore, 1962). Radin Soenarno, "Malay Nationalism, 1896-1941," *Journal of South East Asian History* (March, 1960), and Garth N. Jones, "Soekarno's Early Views Upon the Territorial Boundaries of Indonesia," *Australian Outlook* (April, 1964).

Malaysia, conceived as a political union between ethnic Malays, is hardly a practical concept to apply in a South East Asia of nationally-conscious states. Indeed, for this purpose, it is somewhat anachronistic to deal with human groupings in terms of peoples. It is more realistic to consider identifiable territorial units, each with their own particular interests derived, in part, from their geography. Association, if it should occur, would not be between peoples of so-called Malay origin, but between independent states asserting sovereign rights with all that this could imply by way of conflict of interest. Any practical scheme for political association (especially involving more than two countries) is likely, therefore, to be limited in design. And while, on the one hand, a Malaysia could be expected to be a limited form of association determined by specific circumstances, a more exclusive union—such as the one which came into being on September 16th, 1963—could not be expected to find favor among neighboring states with reason to regard themselves as competing candidates for political leadership.

The Malaysia of Tunku Abdul Rahman, it should be pointed out, is hardly an orthodox exercise in regional association. Indeed, this Malaysia was possible only because the British colonial power in Borneo was anxious to be dispossessed of the territories concerned. The British government was quite happy to pass on this legacy to her respectable former ward, the Prime Minister of Malaya, who saw North Borneo in a Malaysia as a means to remedy the dangerous and anomalous position of Singapore. It was less than a month after a resounding defeat of the governing Singapore People's Action Party in a by-election in April, 1961, that he reversed his hitherto uncompromising attitude towards union of Malay and Singapore, albeit in a wider context. Singapore enjoyed self-governing status but was not fully independent when the island-state joined Malaysia. Her leaders gave up the doubtful prospect of independence for the economic security which union within Malaysia promised. Besides, the P.A.P. government was faced with the imminent prospect of overthrow from the extreme left, and Malaysia—both as a popular issue and as a practical concept—saved its political skin.¹¹ In Sabah and Sarawak, initial opposition to the idea of Malaysia was overcome, partly because it was realized that the British were determined to leave. The Philippines' claim to an undefined part of North Borneo and then Indonesian confrontation were further compelling factors.

As an outcome of negotiations in the first half of 1963 to resolve the dispute over Malaysia, there emerged the notion of Maphilindo—a pro-

¹¹ See Michael Leifer, "Politics in Singapore," *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies* (May, 1964).

spective confederation of so-called Malay nations. The Malayan government was willing to put aside its misgivings and concede the principle of such a confederation as a way of facilitating the acceptance of Malaysia by Indonesia and the Philippines, its prospective confederal partners. The Philippines government, which initiated the proposal in July 1962 (in a limited form which then seemed to exclude Indonesia) had the previous month claimed an undefined part of North Borneo. President Macapagal's proposal for a Malay confederation came at a time when it was common knowledge that the British and Malayan governments were about to finalize arrangements for the establishment of the new Federation of Malaysia. One is forced to conclude, therefore, that President Macapagal's initiative was directly related to the Filipino claim to North Borneo and was seen as a way of either forestalling or superseding the proposed Federation of Malaysia. After the Brunei uprising, in December 1962, the objections of Indonesia to Malaysia came violently to the surface, and this situation offered scope to the Filipino government in its new found efforts to assume a more authentic Asian identity. President Macapagal's proposal for a Malay Confederation was then restated with Indonesian membership specifically included. Through 1963, the Philippines moved closer to a country which symbolized the main stream of Asian nationalism.

Indonesia, as did the Philippines, regarded the concept of Maphilindo as a way to isolate Malaya diplomatically, and thereby, to obtain concessions before Malaysia became a *fait accompli*. The Indonesian government, previously wary of multilateral entanglements, saw in Maphilindo the prospect of establishing its pre-eminence in Maritime South East Asia, as well as an opportunity to remove the British and American presence—considered obstacles to that aim.¹² Maphilindo as a tripartite exercise has, so far, come to naught because of the self-evident incompatibility of interests among all three countries involved. No measures have been taken to implement article nine of the joint statement of the summit conference in Manila (July 30th–August 5th, 1963) which recommended the establishment of national secretariats for Maphilindo affairs. The Indonesian government has not shown any inclination to call off its campaign of confrontation against Malaysia. On the contrary, the outcome of the meeting in June 1964 in Tokyo demonstrated President Soekarno's determination

¹² Article 11 of the Joint Statement issued by the President of Indonesia, the President of the Philippines and the Prime Minister of Malaya in Manila on August 5th, 1963, stated *inter alia*: "The three heads of government further agreed that foreign bases—temporary in nature—should not be allowed to be used directly or indirectly to subvert the national independence of any of the three countries. In accordance with the principle enunciated in the Bandung Declaration, the three countries will abstain from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers."

to maintain Indonesian irregulars in Sabah and Sarawak.¹³ Meanwhile, Indonesian support for a unitary state of North Kalimantan conflicts with Filipino ambitions in Sabah.¹⁴

One common interest between all three countries, which is believed to have encouraged the acceptance of the principle of Maphilindo, is a general resentment of the role of the Overseas Chinese in South East Asia with an attendant fear of the intentions of Communist China. However, this motive could not be expressed openly in Malaya where Overseas Chinese make up approximately 37% of the population. Indeed, the government felt bound to issue vigorous denials that Maphilindo was ever conceived of as an anti-Chinese measure.¹⁵

South East Asia has been traditionally an area subject to dominating influences from outside. At the present time, apart from the unlikely potential of Indonesia, there is no center of countervailing power within the region which could oppose any serious intervention should it appear from its currently expected direction—the North. Maphilindo, it would seem, was in part an attempt to provide for such an exigency. However, its ill-fated history suggests that there would need to be a tangible and direct threat of large scale dimensions to revive the confederal body and to get it to function as an agency of active cooperation in defense. By then, it might prove to be too late, unless assistance were to come from outside the region.

In a recent study, one writer, after an analysis of the difficulties impeding cooperation in South East Asia, concluded that “the usually mentioned obstacles to regional cooperation do not look so large when subjected to close analysis as when they are lumped together.”¹⁶ In a sense, this statement is quite unexceptionable. However, it compares with that attributed apocryphally to a physician who, after examining a patient suffering from several serious complaints, propounded that the condition seemed less critical when each complaint was considered individually rather

¹³ *The Times*, London, 22nd June, 1964.

¹⁴ In the Joint Communique issued following the meeting between President Soekarno and President Macapagal in Manila from January 7th to 11th, 1964, President Soekarno assured President Macapagal of Indonesian support for the Philippine claim to Sabah within the framework of the principle of self-determination. Given continued Indonesian declarations of support for the rights of the people of North Kalimantan, President Soekarno's assurances to President Macapagal cannot be taken at their face value.

¹⁵ See *Straits Times*, Singapore, 17th June, 1963.

¹⁶ Fernand K. Gordon, “Problems of Regional Co-operation in Southeast Asia,” *World Politics* (January, 1964), p. 252.

than all together. The underlying implication of the above quotation is that the divisive factors in the existing relations between South East Asian States are capable of early resolution. The danger of such an assertion is that the reductionist nature of the argument—perhaps convincing in individual cases of conflict—tends to overlook the total picture of normal interstate relationships. These follow essentially from the separate territoriality of the state and the ungoverned nature of international society. Consequently, cooperative ventures must be related to the prospect of tangible advantage likely to accrue to the principals involved. They must also offer no challenge to national sovereignty which is jealously cherished in the new states of Asia. Where they do, overriding exigency is most likely to be the catalyst of political change. An essential element of the movement for unity, which grew up in Western Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, was a deep belief—in certain quarters—that the traditional nation-state had ceased to fulfill any useful function and that it ought to be superseded by some large polity. No such ethics moves minds in South East Asia. And, at the level of cooperation (as opposed to integration) there has yet to be demonstrated any belief that real benefit is likely to accrue from more than a very limited functional association. The statement quoted overlooks, above all, the fact that the political differences which, when taken separately, may appear intrinsically slight are, in essence, a reflection of the resilient nature of the multi-state system of which the states of South East Asia form an essential part.

South East Asia, perhaps more than any other region in the world, demonstrates all the elements of quasi-anarchy and quasi-order which are intrinsic parts of an international society. One can expect no more than that international relations and, consequently, regional association will develop along lines of mutual interest wherever and whenever this is recognized. And here, so-called regional boundaries need have little relevance.

Recently, there have been several examples of attempts at inter-regional mediation in South East Asia. Most notable have been the efforts of Thailand in attempting to resolve the dispute over Malaysia. The Cambodian leader, Prince Sihanouk, has also played some part in this process of attempted conciliation, as well as in arranging the International Conference on Laos in 1961. At the same time, both the Malaysian Prime Minister and the Filipino President have offered their services to Cambodia in connection with disputes with her neighbors. Meanwhile, the Philippines has become less of a protagonist and more of a mediator in the conflict between Malaysia and Indonesia. These experiences could indicate the crude beginnings of an informal process of conflict resolution

within South East Asia.¹⁷ It is this type of activity, together with limited functional economic arrangements, which one would most expect to see as a basis of any development in regional association.

However, it must be reiterated, that South East Asia is no insulated compartment; it is in no sense a natural entity. It has no real similarity to what sociologists would describe as a sub-culture and, for the time being, there is no individual or collective strength available to enforce from within a "Monroe Doctrine" for the area. For these reasons alone, it is advisable to be ultra-cautious in taking conventional boundaries for granted and to expect to see association taking place within these boundaries rather than across them.

In conclusion, it is perhaps significant that South East Asia, as a conventional term, has become increasingly the property of university area specialists. While this is fruitful in that it can bring together scholars from various disciplines, it has its pitfalls in that it can also obscure horizons through an over-obsession with a geographical convention.

¹⁷ A range of institutional possibilities along these lines are suggested by Russell H. Fifield in *Southeast Asia in United States Policy* (New York, 1963), Chapter 12.