

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE SCRAMBLE OF THE MAJOR POWERS FOR INFLUENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

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This essay is an attempt to outline the present trend in Southeast Asian thinking toward Great Powers' politics in the Indian Ocean. Its purpose is to analyze the implications of major powers' interests in the Indian Ocean on the current moves in Southeast Asia for a neutralization of the region. It treats Southeast Asian attitude as represented in the current thinking of the member states of ASEAN,¹ the latest indigenous attempt at regional cooperation.

The first reason for taking ASEAN as the core of Southeast Asian regional thinking is that the organization includes the most stable and important indigenous nations. The second reason is that ASEAN member states have expressed much interest in the participation of the major powers in their own regional affairs. The future development of a common regional thinking in Southeast Asia toward the role of the major powers in the Indian Ocean must, therefore, be considered in the light of the current willingness of the ASEAN states to welcome the participation of the USSR, the USA, and China in Southeast Asian affairs.

Southeast Asia, that region which separates the Indian Ocean from the Pacific Ocean, consists of ten states: Burma, Cambodia, Laos, North and South Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines. It is in this region where the sole link between these two bodies of water is located—the Straits of Malacca. This feature makes the region an important spectator and a participant in the development of international relations that has been taking place in the Indian Ocean since the late 1960's.

Awareness among Southeast Asian states of the importance of the Indian Ocean has been a legacy of the Second World War. The Straits of Malacca provided the strategic passage of war ships and material during that war. Today, as during the colonial times, the Straits of Malacca remains an important international trade route.

¹ ASEAN, the association of Southeast Asian Nations, was established on August 8, 1967 by 5 indigenous nations of the region, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. Its main purpose is to promote economic and cultural cooperation among S.E. Asian states.

Ships of all nations move along the straits night and day; some eastward into the Pacific Ocean and other westward into the Indian Ocean. Any happening in both bodies of water can, therefore, change the function of the Straits of Malacca and consequently the entire region of Southeast Asia.

The Indian Ocean, the body of water lying West of the Southeast Asia region, has been the scene of major powers' activities since the late 1960's. The first major power to manifest its presence in the Indian Ocean was Soviet Russia. When Soviet Prime Minister Leonid Brezhnev outlined his proposal for an Asian Security Pact in 1968, he spoke, among other things, of the "recent developments" in the region, such as: 1) the beginning of the US disengagement from the Asian mainland, 2) the announced British withdrawal from its commitments East of the Suez Canal, except Hongkong, and 3) the emergence of Lin Piao as a hard-line successor to Chairman Mao-Tse-Tung. These seem to underline the Soviet determination to establish its influence in the Indian Ocean.

The presence of Soviet naval movements in the Indian Ocean, plus the increasing Soviet diplomatic activity in Southeast Asia demonstrate that the USSR is bent on establishing itself as an Asian Power with the purpose of taking over British influence, displacing American interest in the area, and containing Communist China.

What are some of the indicators of Russian presence in the Indian Ocean? There is a Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron consisting of about fourteen warships and including at least one nuclear submarine. The Soviet influence over the Indian Navy is also becoming more and more felt. "Foxtrot" submarines have been bought from Russia and are based at Vishakhapatnam, the headquarters of the Bengal Fleet. Some Russian advisers are reportedly helping the Indian Navy. In fact, the Commander in Chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Kogorshkov, visited Vishakhapatnam in 1968. There are also some rumors that Vishakhapatnam may be developed into a joint Indo-Russian base. On the West side of the Indian Ocean, Soviet ships have been maneuvering around Aden, Mombasa, Assawa, and Mauritius. Zond-V's splashdown was carried out in the vicinity of Mauritius island.²

The Soviet intrusion into the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia³ has automatically attracted the attention of the USA. Although the Nixon Administration expressed concern for the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean, the movements of the US have so far been limited because of its participation in a war in the Asian mainland. It is however probable that the war in Vietnam cannot continue for a long time and, in this respect, a settlement in Vietnam, followed by the with-

² *The Mirror*, December 29, 1969, p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, November 4, 1968, p. 3.

drawal of over half a million men would surely result in a substantial reduction of the US physical presence in the Asian region. The present undertaking of the US in the Indo-China area confines its activity to just being a watchful but suspicious spectator of the political developments in the Indian Ocean. Apparently, the US does not intend to rush into the area while it is still entangled in a war in Indo-China. It will limit its main interest to an effort to hold to one or more strategically located islands in the Indian Ocean and denying their use to other hostile powers. In this connection, the Nixon Administration with its Pacific Allies is supporting the development of a base in Diego Garcia, the largest island in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

China's lack of a naval power limits its capacity to display its physical presence in the Indian Ocean. All China can do at the moment is to compete with the USSR and the USA in making its power status felt in the entire region, trying to develop its nuclear capability. In hoping to gain the support of Asian nations, China has declared its willingness to grant aids for economic development. The fact that Russia and the United States are both hostile to China has also helped to limit the growth of Chinese movement into the Indian Ocean.

The attitudes of the Southeast Asian states toward these political developments in the Indian Ocean are better expressed in terms of how they view the presence of the major powers in their own region. Most Southeast Asian nations have indicated their willingness to welcome the increasing interests of all major powers in their area. Commenting on the presence of all power interests in the Southeast Asia region, R.S. Rajaratnam explained:

"They (the major powers) will keep close watch on one another's activities and make it easier for us... Singapore would welcome China as one of the many countries which would take a positive interest in Southeast Nations."⁴

One of the most vocal advocates for the presence of all major powers in Southeast Asia is Malaysia's Prime Minister, Tun Razak. When he was interviewed on his views concerning the presence of Russian naval forces in the Indian Ocean, he said:

"Malaysia does not consider the presence of Russian Naval Forces in the Indian Ocean as posing a threat to Malaysia in particular and to Southeast Asia in general.

"...all the Big Powers of the world should guarantee the integrity of the countries in the region."⁵

These statements simply indicate that certain Southeast Asian nations are aware that major power activities in the Indian Ocean are not a cause for alarm. In fact, the movement of the major powers into the

⁴ *Ibid.*, October 20, 1969, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, September 22, 1969, p. 2.

Indian Ocean might create the proper atmosphere for a gradual participation of the big powers in the common regional affairs of the Southeast Asian nations.

There is a current thinking among the member states of ASEAN to establish a neutralized region which should be guaranteed by all the major powers in the region. This idea was formally proposed by Tun Ismail, Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, at the United Nations General Assembly Session in October, 1970:

"I wish to re-iterate from this Rostrum my Government's call for the neutralization not only of the Indo-China area but also of the entire region of S.E. Asia, guaranteed by the three super powers, the Peoples' Republic of China the Soviet Union, and the United States."⁶

Although there was no immediate response to such a proposal, the idea was not discarded. At the recent ASEAN Fourth Ministerial Conference held in Manila on March 12-13, 1971, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Adam Malik, expressed his government's interest in "any move that would provide an umbrella of neutrality for all of Southeast Asia."⁷

The Philippine response to the Malaysia plan was recently explained by President Ferdinand E. Marcos in the following:

"Anything which would maintain peace in the area such as the Malaysian call for the neutralization of S. E. Asia would be supported but first we would like to see the big powers get together and find out if there's any chance for neutralization."⁸

There is therefore reason to believe that this interest of certain ASEAN countries for a neutralized Southeast Asia will determine the future regional attitude toward the development of the major powers' presence in the Indian Ocean.

If the present scramble for influence in the Indian Ocean develops into a pattern that will configurate an equal participation of the three super powers — China, the USSR, and the USA — then it will facilitate the ASEAN endeavor to attract these major powers as equal guarantors for a neutralized Southeast Asia. Therefore, the present flow of influence of the major powers into the Indian Ocean is not contrary to the wishes of the ASEAN states. The politics of the major powers in the Indian Ocean complements the search for a scheme that would give birth to a neutralized Southeast Asia.

⁶ *The Straits Times*, October 16, 1970, p. 12.

⁷ *The Manila Bulletin*, March 12, 1971, p. 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, March 19, 1971, p. 2.