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THE SENIOR SEMINAR IN FOREIGN POLICY

ELEVENTH SESSION
1968 - 1969

SOUTHEAST ASIA AFTER VIETNAM
The Prospects for Regional Action for National
Security

A Case Study

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SUMMARY

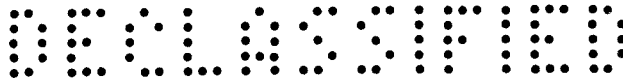
This study explores the future of regionalism and international cooperation in Southeast Asia with regard to national security in the post-Vietnam period. It surveys the attitudes of Southeast Asian leaders toward the security threat which they may face, as well as toward the development of relevant regional mechanisms and cooperation. It then assesses these attitudes and discusses their implications for the U.S.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA AFTER VIETNAM
The Prospects for Regional Action for National Security

Introduction

In the discussion of what role the U.S. should play in the defense of Southeast Asia following a Vietnam settlement, the question of what Southeast Asia will do in its own defense is often asked. A common line of argument holds, in fact, that an American response to an Asian threat should depend on the existence of indigenous mechanisms for collective security. This view was, for example, expressed by Richard M. Nixon in Foreign Affairs (October, 1967, "Asia after Vietnam,") as follows: "To ensure that a U.S. response will be forthcoming if needed, machinery must be created which is capable of meeting two conditions: (a) a collective effort by the nations of the region to contain the threat by themselves; and, if that effort fails, (b) a collective request to the United States for assistance."

A regional sense and regional organizations have certainly been developing in Asia and, more specifically, in Southeast Asia. Varying objectives have been declared, including achievement of economic development and political stability, and preservation of national independence. Do the foundations of a collective security structure lie in what has been done or planned? In the answer to this question lies the purpose of this study and of a recent visit to Southeast Asia.* Specifically, this paper attempts to describe Southeast Asian attitudes toward regional cooperation for national security, and to assess the prospects for such cooperation.

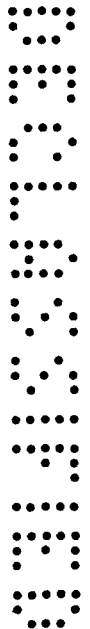
In order to leap-frog past the war in Vietnam for a look at the post-war era, I have postulated a settlement resulting in an independent South Vietnam and, given its direct relevance, an end to hostilities in Laos on some basis such as the Geneva accords. It is, perhaps, a mark of their confidence in a Vietnam settlement that none of my interlocutors in the area rejected this as a basis for discussion of the future, although a number questioned the durability of any peace in Vietnam.

How the Threat to Southeast Asia is Seen

For all the differences among Southeast Asian governments in policy toward cooperation in the area of security, none doubt the continued existence of a threat to the security of the non-communist states of the region.

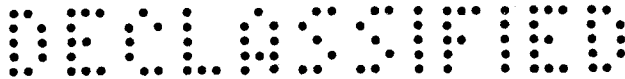
Not surprisingly, North Vietnam's nearest neighbors, the Lao and the Thai, are more sensitive than others to the danger of expansionist acts by Hanoi which might follow an end to the war in the south.

* Countries visited: Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia. Although Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma and the Philippines could not be included in the itinerary, they were often discussed with officials of the countries visited.



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Fear of China seems universal, if varying in quality. Traditional attitudes toward a menacing great power to the north retain a reality quite apart from concern with the threat of communism. Except in Indonesia, whose leaders see their country as a major target of Chinese military expansion, subversion rather than military action is commonly regarded as the means by which China will seek to spread its control southward.

The millions of overseas Chinese in the region are the target of considerable suspicion that they may form the locus of subversion directed from Peking. Curiously, however, the most explicit anti-Chinese action brought to my attention was in the ethnically Chinese state of Singapore, where stringent immigration laws bar children over five years of age on the assumption that only tots in China are free from the poison of Communist indoctrination.

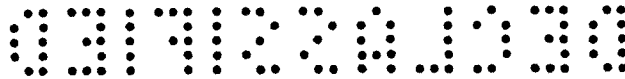
Short of takeover, the threat from China is seen in instability arising either out of Peking-supported insurgencies, several of which are endemic in Thailand and Malaysia, or out of mere proximity to China coupled with internal weakness, as in Burma.

The thesis that Peking has no designs on territory beyond China's traditional borders, for all its attraction to various students of China, gets no visible support in Southeast Asia, where the thesis would be tested.

The domino, chipped and scarred as it may be, has striking reality for Southeast Asians today, and its tilting path can be followed from Vientiane to Djakarta in the words of officials in those and intervening capitals. The Lao, who need little imagination to postulate a Communist design on their independence, are followed by the Thai, who see a move against them once Vientiane falls. The Malaysians, who share that view, see their time of immediate peril following a takeover of Thailand. Singapore, in turn, sees its independence in danger if Malaysia succumbs to attack or subversion. Finally, Djakarta - as suggested earlier - sees Peking moving through the Southeast Asian mainland in order to reach its goal across the straits.

Woven through the pattern of fear of China and North Vietnam are suspicions, animosities and fears of neighbors, some with their roots deep in history. The Lao, even while receiving support from Thailand in their struggle for existence, suspect that the Thai will one day turn on them. Malaysians resent what they see as a lack of Thai cooperation in dealing with an insurgency along their common border. With memories of "confrontation" still fresh, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore express confidence in Suharto not to threaten them, but fear the effect of any change of leadership in Djakarta. Most conspicuous, the Philippine-Malaysian dispute over Sabah has recently paralyzed a major regional organization.





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Southeast Asia's View of Its Future

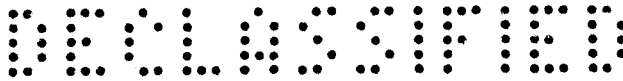
Any consideration of regionalism or international cooperation in Southeast Asia should begin by noting how recently such ideas have become possible. Except for Thailand, independence has come to the countries of the region only during the past two dozen years and - in the case of Singapore - as recently as 1965. The heritage of a colonial past persists, with ties to a former metropolitan power often more real than those to a neighbor. The point was well made by a senior Indonesian official who said that he knew far more about the canals of Holland than about those in Bangkok. Thus, any progress in regional cooperation must face not only traditional suspicions and uncertainties, but a lack of contact and familiarity with one's neighbors.

Nevertheless, a beginning has been made in creating a fabric of regional organization. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to describe these organizations, a brief review of the experience helps in assessing the prospects for joint action aimed at national security.

In August, 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in Bangkok. The member states are Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, of which the first two were the prime movers. In stating its aims, ASEAN's members emphasized economic, cultural, scientific and technical cooperation. While they also declared their adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter, and their determination "to ensure stability and security from external interference in any form...", the member governments agreed at the outset that ASEAN would not undertake political action and would not be aimed against anyone.

Unfortunately, ASEAN soon became embroiled in a political dispute which has essentially halted its operations. The Philippine claim to Sabah was raised by Manila in ASEAN and, lacking agreement at least on a formula which would insulate the dispute, ASEAN meetings have been suspended.

In some contrast to the non-political objectives of ASEAN, the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC), formed at Seoul in June, 1966, dedicated itself to "solidarity against external threats and interference" and to the preservation of national integrity and independence against such threats. Its Southeast Asian members include Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and South Vietnam, with Laos an observer. (Others are Japan, Korea, Republic of China, Australia and New Zealand.) In its latest ministerial meeting in Mid-1968, ASPAC discussed political questions such as the situation in Communist China, North Korean infiltration into South Korea, the Vietnamese war and nuclear nonproliferation. The communique reported that the ministers "reaffirmed their support for the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter," and that they "recognized the value of regional arrangements for peace and security such as envisaged in Article 52 of the Charter -- " The meeting also recorded progress in a number of projects of economic, social and cultural cooperation.



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Lao leaders operate from the assumption that their country will remain neutralized, and thus not free to take part in any regional organization having a security function. They, as well, see Laos as a pawn rather than an actor in working out the area's future political arrangements. Thus, beyond active interest in such programs as Mekong development, which may increase the economic viability of this anomalous and divided country, Laos' leaders live for tomorrow. They need not speculate on the nature of any future threat to their country. They live without illusion as to their ability to survive by their own efforts. As they look around at their neighbors, they see either present enemies or old animosities. The Lao are as bewildered by Sihanouk as others, but more dangerously affected by his policies than most. Of Thailand, as noted earlier, they harbor fears even while receiving Thai support. Under the circumstances, the fact that Lao leaders were willing to discuss the future with a visitor says something for the serenity of character for which the Lao are admired, or for a toughness of fibre not normally attributed to them.

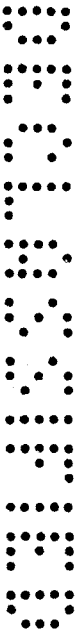
Malaysia's outlook on the future is affected by a number of factors in her present situation: her relative prosperity and stable political situation; the serious stresses between the Malay community and the Chinese and Indian "foreigners"; the vivid memory of Indonesian "confrontation"; Philippine reassertion of a claim to Sabah; and the impending withdrawal of British forces, which shakes important Commonwealth assumptions related to Malaysia's security. This last is central since, during Malaysia's several years of independence, the British presence and Commonwealth ties largely answered questions related to national defense. Even today, the concept of five-power (Malaysia, Singapore, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand) defense arrangements has currency in Kuala Lumpur.

Since Malaysia is in the middle of the Sabah dispute which has suspended ASEAN meetings, it is understandable that Malaysians are reserved in their expectations for ASEAN, particularly as a vehicle for security arrangements.

The persistence of insurgency in the Malaysian-Thai border area is a continuing reminder of the dangers of subversion directed from outside, from which Malaysia suffered so severely before its independence.

With all this, the Malaysians live with an active concern for the risks of instability which would upset their successful development. They are prepared to be good Southeast Asians and to take part in regional development programs. They have not yet, apparently, seen their way to alternatives for Commonwealth mechanisms to deal with the threat from Peking about which they are outspoken.

Singapore, both literally and figuratively a small island, reflects this in its approach to its future. Lee Kuan Yew, a forceful leader, has put his personal imprint on the national posture. Lee, who foresees the fall of South Vietnam, looks to the possibility of a defense line against the communists along the Mekong. He has a low regard for Malaysia's leadership, and puts reliance -- without great confidence -- in the ability of the Thai to hold firm. At the same time, Singapore's





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leaders seem to have some hope that neutral Singapore can play some kind of middle-man role among communist and non-communist states and that, even if Southeast Asia falls, Singapore may be permitted to live as a sort of second Hong Kong. Singaporeans do not see ASEAN as a political instrument, nor do they see their modest-sized country as a factor in any defense effort.

Indonesia, largest country of the region, is still deeply preoccupied with its recovery from the chaos in which Sukarno left it. At the same time, however, its leaders are actively considering how Indonesia may move out of its recent isolation and alienation from its neighbors. Far from adopting insular attitudes toward regional security, they are - at least in private - more willing than their neighbors to the north to grapple with the realities of how security can be developed and preserved. It was only in Djakarta that I heard officials express the expectation that their country would move to support a neighbor - specifically Thailand or Malaysia - under attack. This does not, of course, stem from sheer altruism, given Indonesia's view of itself as the prime target of an expansionist China. Assuming economic progress, which has first priority, Djakarta foresees development of cooperative arrangements, either bilateral or multilateral, including military training and other joint action in the field of national security.

A number of important common threads run through the positions of the governments of Southeast Asia. First, all consider a continued U.S. presence in the area essential. From Vientiane, where an American presence has vital reality, to Djakarta, whose confirmed opposition to foreign bases is carefully hedged to exempt American bases in neighboring countries, all concerned assert that some U.S. commitment to support the independence of the Southeast Asian countries is required at least until some future time when the burden of security can be borne indigenously. In Bangkok, even as Foreign Minister Thanat spoke publicly of possible withdrawal of American troops after Vietnam, officials were at pains to point out privately that there was no intention to force the departure of all U.S. forces.

In essence, the argument for a U.S. commitment holds that the Southeast Asian nations need a breathing space after Vietnam, a time to achieve economic stability and experience in cooperation which are essential to regional security. The role often prescribed for the U.S. was that of guarantor or of over-the-horizon presence, providing deterrence to Chinese moves against the area.

Common views were expressed or elicited concerning the roles of Australia and New Zealand in the area. Both are welcome to participate both economically and politically, and gratification is often expressed at Australia's growing interest in Southeast Asia.

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Japan evokes greater interest, but less unanimity. The major economic penetration of the area by the Japanese is accepted, if not welcomed. However, memories of the Southeast Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere remain vivid. Few expect Japan to refrain indefinitely from acquiring a major military capacity. Few, as well, trust Japan to use it in the best interests of independence in Southeast Asia. While some find acceptable Japanese participation in a broad regional defense arrangement - at least with an Australian counterweight - others flatly declare that Japanese under arms are unwelcome.

I might note here that there appears little interest, except possibly in Manila, in larger Asian or Asian-Pacific defense arrangements. ASPAC is not seen even in Thailand and Malaysia, both member countries, as an important organ for regional action.

The recent expansion of Soviet diplomatic activity in Southeast Asia has attracted considerable interest and speculation both as to Soviet motives and as to what role the USSR might play in the future of the region. Some see the Soviets as involved in an act of containment of Peking's Asian ambitions. Under this hopeful thesis, these officials would welcome increased Soviet activity in the area. Others, without making value judgments, consider that the USSR would be expected to take part in any great power guarantee of the stability of the area during its development. These attitudes are not untinged with uneasiness lest Soviet entry make the area a pawn in increased great power competition.

Prospects and Implications

The following ingredients may, then, be distilled out of the Southeast Asian view of the region's future: (1) expectation of a continuing threat emanating from Peking and Hanoi; (2) preoccupation with the problems of economic development and internal stability; (3) growing interest in regional approaches to common problems; (4) lack of confidence that any indigenous effort, national or regional, can meet the needs of national security; and, (5) a conviction that outside protection, provided by the U.S. and possibly other powers, is essential.

This is not the place to discuss or analyze Peking's intentions in Southeast Asia. In any event, Southeast Asia's actions will, to a considerable degree, be governed by its own judgments of Peking, not by Peking's actions. Thus, barring a basic reassessment of Chinese intentions, Southeast Asian states will continue to pursue policies postulated upon the existence of a threat. This means, for example, that in the absence of outside guarantees for the area, each country will feel obliged to reach basic decisions as to its defense posture. With the possible exception of Indonesia, no government can conceivably adopt policies based upon the possibility of military defense against a Chinese attack. The prospect of collective defense is only somewhat less unreal, even if based upon the assumption of fully pooled military resources available on behalf of any state. Of course, if the Southeast Asians take into account Peking's nuclear capacity, the imbalance is beyond measurement.

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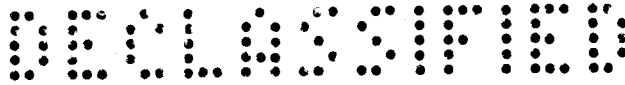
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To the extent, however, that the Chinese threat is seen as taking the form of subversion, the problem for Southeast Asia is less overwhelming. As most Southeast Asian leaders argue, economic development, social progress and political stability are not only basic national objectives, but will combine to create the kind of climate in which subversion and dissidence are least likely to flourish.

It is in this sense only that one can realistically relate the prospects for regional cooperation in Southeast Asia to the region's security. If Southeast Asian predictions prove accurate, a growing experience in regionalism will bear fruit in quickened economic development, in broader efforts at cooperation in technical, scientific and other fields of value to these societies as they try to move toward self-sufficiency, social progress and political stability. Beyond this, however, there is little consensus and even less constructive thinking as to where regional cooperation will go. Thanat Khoman's assertion that Asians will find an Asian way to deal with their security, and ASPAC's declaration of support for the U.N. Charter hardly represent a blueprint for the future.

A realistic assessment must, in any case, take into account the continuing frailty of the regional effort. The Sabah dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia is a painful reminder of the persistence of animosities and of how they can block joint action. The cynic may well ask whether increased contact stemming from regional activities will necessarily increase mutual esteem and ease of cooperation. Even in economic fields, cooperation is still in its early stages. There are, so far, no broad areas of agreed or assured cooperation or major programs (outside the Mekong) based upon either shared or complementary interests. Talk of a Southeast Asian Common Market is, at best, premature in countries some of which can only offer to exchange agricultural products and handicrafts. In countries which are only today developing a sense of nationhood, one must ask whether nationalism and regionalism - to a degree antithetical - can flourish together. The fact that regionalism seems to have little popular support or interest may, oddly, minimize any confrontation with nationalism, particularly since most projects will for some time have limited general impact.

In any case, a hopeful view of regionalism suggests that useful projects will be developed and will succeed, and that success will beget both further success and broader efforts. Thus - to return to the question of national security - with the likelihood of encouragement from Indonesia and Thailand, the states of the area may, in time, develop some degree of coordination of political action and national military efforts, particularly in such fields as training, exchange of information and joint action against dissidence. There is, by the way, a current example of such cooperation, between Indonesia and Malaysia in dealing with subversion in Sarawak.

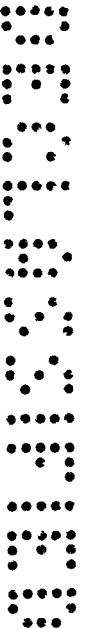


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The degree to which regional cooperation succeeds is, of course, dependent upon many factors, some imponderable, and most quite beyond the control or influence of the U.S. One major consideration, however, flows from Southeast Asia's own preoccupation with the Chinese menace and its conviction that its future can be secure only with outside protection, primarily American. While it is difficult to assess, some Southeast Asian opinion holds that, without outside protection, these weak states can only hope to avoid absorption by pursuing a kind of craven neutralism which may reassure Peking and encourage it to accept a territorial status quo. Most often, Burma is pointed to as an example of this process.

Peking has repeatedly attacked regional cooperation in the area. If Southeast Asian leaders were to turn to accommodation in the absence of outside security guarantees, their arguments for such guarantees would prove to have had the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the Southeast Asian governments consider that they have been abandoned by outside powers -- including the United States -- the prospects for progress and stability in the area will be substantially worsened. It seems unlikely, under any circumstances, that the Southeast Asians will meet the kind of conditions for U.S. assistance stipulated by Mr. Nixon in Foreign Affairs.

Since there is considerable variety, and some lack of clarity, among Southeast Asian views as to what would constitute an adequate security umbrella, it is difficult to postulate a policy which would, in fact, underpin progress in the area. In any event, this raises both broader and more fundamental questions which relate to future U.S. posture in Asia and the Pacific, and would take me far beyond the limits of this study.



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