

ASEAN AND THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: PERSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTS

Chiang Hai Ding

The German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher is recognised as a champion of the Third World in general and of the ASEAN-EC relationship in particular. The abbreviation EC for European Community instead of EEC for European Economic Community is deliberately used. First, the ASEAN-EC relationship has gone far beyond the purely economic. There is a very strong political dimension. Second, the economic relationship is handled by the ASEAN ambassadors in Brussels who deal with the European Commission which has, for example, competence over trade matters for the Ten members of the EC. But the ASEAN Ambassadors in the other countries deal with other matters as well.

What has been achieved in the ASEAN-EC relationship? Each region has a population of about 250 million, with the EC about 10% larger. ASEAN is about twice as large in area, with over 3 million square km. Obviously ASEAN is poorer than the EC, but we have higher rates of growth, one of the few regions of the world still to have positive growth rates.

We have five countries on our side and the EC has ten on its side. ASEAN works on the consensus principle. The EC adopted the majority principle, then back-tracked so that, in effect, it also operates by consensus. Consultations within the Five and the Ten, and then between the two groupings, take time, as they deal not only with each other, internally as it were, but with others as well in bilateral terms and within the framework of their respective regional groupings.

The Achievements

It is amazing how substantial the ASEAN-EC relationship has become. There have been three ASEAN-EC Ministerial Meetings. The first-ever EC Foreign Ministers' Meeting together as a group, with the Foreign Ministers of another group, those of ASEAN, took place in Brussels in November 1978. They found that historic meeting worthwhile, for they

met again in Kuala Lumpur in March 1980, and concluded a Cooperation Agreement. They met for the third in October 1981 in London. What have resulted from these high-level activities?

Economically, the EC accounts for 13% of foreign investments in ASEAN, compared with 32% for Japan and 20% for the US. Trade quadrupled between 1973 and 1980, with a surplus of about US\$ 2 billion in favour of ASEAN. Both regions are committed to pursuing policies to increase investments in ASEAN and trade between them.

Politically, there is a close approximation of views, especially as regards the Southeast Asian region. The EC takes the view that as ASEAN is part of the region it is better informed, and if the Five countries can come up with a common view, it is likely to be well-founded. Thus the EC supported ASEAN when it successfully called for a UN International Conference on Vietnamese Refugees in Geneva in July 1979. The German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt agreed to a request of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to convey to President Brezhnev, during his June 1980 visit to Moscow, ASEAN's concern about Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia. The EC also supported ASEAN's call for an International Conference on Kampuchea in July 1981 in New York.

ASEAN, in turn, has endorsed the European Community's condemnation of the USSR invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. ASEAN supported European plans to return Afghanistan to its independent and non-aligned status.

Furthermore, the ASEAN-EC relationship is an excellent example of a North-South relationship that works. A North-South Summit of 22 selected Heads of Government was held in Cancun, Mexico in October 1981. From ASEAN went President Marcos of the Philippines following consultations with his four colleagues.

For the EC, ASEAN is a Southern region which shares its philosophy of growth through cooperation. ASEAN is recognised as a factor of stability in Southeast Asia, and as five voices of moderation in the fora of the Third World.

ASEAN collectively is greater than the sum of its parts. All Five are members of the UN and its agencies and bodies, such as UNCTAD, G77 and the Law of the Sea Conference, which has Singapore Ambassador Tommy Koh as President. Three of the Five are members of the Non-Aligned Movement, namely Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Two are

members of the Commonwealth: Malaysia and Singapore. Two are members of the Conference of Islamic Countries: Indonesia and Malaysia. One is member of OPEC: Indonesia.

As such, ASEAN can be seen, heard and felt in a very considerable part of the world, and not just in Southeast Asia. Vietnam could not have imagined that, even with USSR backing, it would run against world opinion in the UN for three years, which condemned its occupation of Cambodia. This was in largest measure due to the effort of ASEAN.

For ASEAN, many members of the EC are known quantities because of the previous colonial ties. In fact, because of the historical connexion there exists considerable understanding and sympathy. Thus, because the UK joined the then EEC Six, special arrangements were made for the Asian Commonwealth states including Malaysia and Singapore, with the understanding that whatever was done for them would be extended to the other three ASEAN states of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. In particular ASEAN has benefited from the EC's Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP).

Apart from investments and trade, ASEAN has also received from the EC financial and technical assistance, such as in trade fairs, that is, how to sell in the EC. ASEAN has received technical training. More cooperative ventures are being worked out in Brussels.

The Global Perception

Let us turn to the geo-strategic considerations of the ASEAN-EC relationship. The link is succinctly summarised by Singapore Foreign Ministry's publication 'From Phnom Penh to Kabul'. That is, the events in Cambodia, so close to us, are linked up with those in Afghanistan, which are of great importance to the EC and indeed to the whole non-communist world.

Most Europeans need no reminder regarding the threat of the USSR. Germany (Deutschland) is a divided country and West Berlin is completely surrounded by communist East Germany. Europe is divided into Western Europe, allied with the US, and Eastern Europe, dominated by the USSR. Most West Europeans know that their security lies with the US, not with the USSR. They pursue peace and detente but not at the risk of their security.

The USSR now has a global reach with a naval force developed in the last decade, and still being developed. Its purpose, says its master-mind, Admiral Gorshkov, is "to prepare the way for a communised world".

The USSR is a land power. It does not need such an enormous navy, though Gorshkov would disagree.

First, its East European satellites adjoin it by land. Second, its rival communist power, the PRC, also adjoins it by land. In fact, some unkind West Europeans say that the USSR is the only country in the world surrounded by hostile communist neighbours. Third, the USSR has little by way of international trade that needs protecting.

Yet, between Western Europe and ASEAN, the USSR has established, directly or through proxies, a presence that could threaten the vital maritime trade routes. First, the USSR has a presence in Angola and Mozambique that could affect the entry into the Indian Ocean through the Cape of Good Hope. Second, it has pro-USSR regimes in Ethiopia and South Yemen, at the southern end of the Red Sea, leading to the Suez Canal. Third, by occupying Afghanistan with 85,000 men, it is only 800 km from the Straits of Hormuz, through which passes half of Western Europe's oil, three-quarters of Japan's and one-third of the US. In fact, two-thirds of the oil supply of the non-communist world passes through the Straits of Hormuz.

The situation regarding the other entrance into the Indian Ocean is also threatened, namely the Straits of Malacca. Since the British announced their withdrawal East of Suez in 1968, the USSR immediately began building up a naval presence there. The US is only now responding to this challenge by developing Diego Garcia and a Rapid Deployment Force. On the other side of the Straits of Malacca, in the Pacific Ocean, through which oil to Japan must pass, the USSR has now use of Cam Ranh Bay and Danang, thus gaining a tremendous strategic advantage.

The perceptions of the USSR threat by the EC and ASEAN are close approximations of each other. If the USSR has not utilized its advantage yet, it may be due to a number of factors. First, adverse and continuing Western and Third World reaction to communist aggression in Cambodia and Afghanistan. Second, the USSR is caught in a bind over Poland, and may be about to encounter other, mainly economic, problems among its Eastern European satellites. Third, the US has decided to resist the USSR challenge on a global scale.

The Prospects

What are the prospects? First, the ASEAN-EC relationship clearly points to the value of regional cooperation, and also inter-regional cooperation. Thus there have arisen new and tentative regional groupings in other areas of uncertainty, in the Middle East, in South Asia and in the Caribbean. They all had seen the results of ASEAN, and the results of its cooperation with the EC. For its part, the EC has encouraged regional groupings in the Third World.

Second, the ASEAN-EC relationship also points to the usefulness of like-minded regional groupings cooperating to help preserve their common stake namely, the free enterprise economy and the security of the maritime trade routes.

Some years ago, the then optimists talked of islands of security and progress in a swelling sea of anarchy. Today, because of the ASEAN-EC success, we can envision archipelagoes of security and prosperity. Linked together in common cooperative effort, these archipelagoes will make for a more calculable and rational world in the future.