

## SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE POWER TRIANGLE - USA, USSR, PRC

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### The basic political theatre

Britain and the United States had been the major determinants of developments in Southeast Asia. These Atlantic allies were also allies in the Pacific, but in 1967 the British Labour Government announced its policy of withdrawal from East of Suez. In 1969 President Nixon enunciated his "Guam Doctrine", signalling American intention to eventually disengage from Vietnam. In 1971 Nixon continued this policy by introducing the "China card" into international diplomacy, thus "triangulating" what had been a bi-polar situation. In 1975, the United States suffered a reversal in Southeast Asia. North Vietnam overran South Vietnam and communist forces also formed the governments in Laos and Cambodia. The reduced Western military presence in Southeast Asia was matched by an increased diplomatic presence of both China and Russia in the member-states of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations); while in 1971, there were no Chinese embassies, in 1975, there were three and in 1967, there were three Russian embassies, in 1975, four and in 1976 five.

### The New Vietnam War

In 1979 Sino-Soviet rivalry erupted in Southeast Asia. Responsible for this was Vietnam which had thrown in its lot with the Soviet Union. It applied for membership of the communist economic bloc COMECON on 28 June 1978, the application was approved just one day later. Vietnam then signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union on 3 November 1978. On 25 December 1978 Vietnamese forces attacked Cambodia, toppled the Pol Pot government and established the puppet Heng Samrin regime on 10 January 1979. The unprecedented speed of these events show that there was a well-planned programme of action.

During his well-publicized tour of the United States at the end of January and early February 1979, Deng Xiaoping spoke repeatedly of "punishing" the Vietnamese for their aggression. Shortly after his return to China (within two

weeks), Chinese forces attacked Vietnam and quickly withdrew back to Chinese territory (within three weeks). The Soviet Union launched a massive sea-borne delivery of military aid to Vietnam but did not attack China, which continued its military aid to the toppled Cambodian government.

What are the stakes for the combatants, contestants and other interested parties in this new Vietnam war?

Vietnam lost virtually all the admiration it previously enjoyed, particularly of Third World countries, and earned their condemnation. Its callous treatment of hundreds of thousands of its own people in Vietnam created the so-called "boat people" who fled to ASEAN countries. The military occupation of Cambodia created hundreds of thousands of refugees, the so-called "land people", who fled to Thailand.

In the course of this Vietnam lost virtually all prospects of international cooperation for its national reconstruction because it refused to comply with United Nations resolutions calling for the complete withdrawal of its forces from Cambodia. It is now almost totally dependent on assistance from the Soviet Union and other COMECON countries.

And furthermore, Vietnam lost its freedom to manoeuvre. It had prudently steered between its two giant communist backers during its war against the United States. Vietnam now abridged its independence by a Russian alliance and endangered that independence by a war with its Chinese neighbour.

Vietnam is not closer to, but further from, its ambition to create an Indochinese federation. Its war-torn economy is a shambles. Its colonial hold in Cambodia is challenged by the nationalist coalition led by Prince Sihanouk and the former Prime Minister Son Sann.

The Peoples Republic of China on the other hand has benefitted from this Vietnam war. It has established beyond doubt that it is a major factor that has to be taken into account in Southeast Asia. It has gained the goodwill of Thailand by its assurance that it will give all-out support in the event of a Vietnamese attack.

China gained a psychological advantage by appearing to be on the side of ASEAN and the West at international fora on the question of Cambodia, and it has developed its relationship with the West. Relations with the United States normalized, a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Japan was concluded and political cooperation with the European Community initiated, the first time that the latter has undertaken it with any communist country. The Chinese have an entré to Western technology which should enable them to achieve modernization more rapidly.



The Soviet Union too has benefitted. Firstly, its global position as a maritime power has been extended and strengthened. The Russians had rushed into the Indian Ocean in 1968 as soon as the British announced their withdrawal from East of Suez. In 1969 they proposed an Asian Collective Security arrangement under Russian leadership. The alliance with Vietnam in 1978 gave the Soviet Union facilities in Cam Ranh Bay and Danang which added greatly to the capabilities of their Pacific Fleet based in Vladivostok and Petropavlovsk. From this position they can threaten China from its southern flank and challenge the American position in the Pacific. Secondly, the Soviet Union registered through Vietnam a military presence in Southeast Asia. Like China, the Soviet Union also has to be taken into consideration.

The position of the United States has deteriorated relative to those of China and the Soviet Union. It faces a bigger and more serious challenge from the other superpower. The extent of that Russian challenge world-wide and American inability to project power was effectively driven home by events in Iran and Afghanistan. The United States was aware that its inaction would encourage the Soviet Union in adventurism and create opportunities for China. It can be argued that absence of a categorical American assurance of support led Thailand to accept a Chinese one against the Vietnamese.

The United States appears, however, to be overcoming the "Vietnam syndrome". It is rebuilding its military might to match its determination to meet the global challenge of the Soviet Union. At the same time it has called on its allies to do more. As a two-ocean power, whose trade with the Pacific has exceeded that with the Atlantic, the US is more conscious of the need to enhance its influence in the Pacific.

Two highly interested parties are Japan and ASEAN. Japan had previously shied away from defence responsibilities by relying on the American shield and by emphasizing constitutional inhibitions. But it viewed with increasing dismay the augmentation of Russian strength, first, in the waters to its north and, second, along the maritime routes which its oil imports have to travel. Japan is moving to play a bigger role in its own defence with a view to releasing American power for deployment elsewhere. It took a new and high profile at the 1983 Williamsburg Summit of Western Industrialized Nations.

ASEAN was formed in 1967 to promote economic development through regional cooperation. But it had increasingly to deal with political and security issues which affect

peace and stability, the pre-requisites for development. Thus ASEAN led the move which convinced the United Nations not to reward Vietnamese aggression and to deny legitimacy to the puppet regime in Cambodia. ASEAN has no objection to an Indochinese federation provided it is by the freely-expressed consent of the people of the three countries of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. ASEAN believes that if aggression is not insistently challenged it will become common-place and be regarded as a new norm in international relations. This might lead to the creeping extension of the Brezhnev doctrine into Southeast Asia. But ASEAN also views with concern the extension of Chinese influence into Southeast Asia. Although China appears to support the ASEAN position on the question of Cambodia, Chinese objectives are quite different from ASEAN ones. The Chinese want to bleed Vietnam to bring about a reversal of its alliance with Russia. ASEAN does not want to see an enfeebled Vietnam but it is up to Vietnam to take steps to extricate itself and to devote its energies instead of national reconstruction.

### The Outlook for Southeast Asia

What are the prospects for Southeast Asia?

ASEAN, which was enlarged by the accession of oil-rich Brunei in January 1984, has certainly a key position in Southeast Asia. ASEAN stretches north to south from mainland Asia into island Southeast Asia. It links the two continents of Asia and Australia. It stretches east to west from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. The principal maritime routes pass through ASEAN waters, the most important being the Straits of Malacca. ASEAN is a prize worth grabbing not only for these strategic reasons but also for its natural resources and economic prosperity.

The loss of ASEAN to a power hostile to the West, apart from the consequences to the six ASEAN member-states, would also mean that the sea-lanes between Europe and Japan are in danger. The supplies of oil from the Middle East and Southeast Asia to Japan could be threatened. The capability of the United States to deploy its Seventh Fleet to the Middle East could be severely affected, with grave implications for Western Europe and Japan as well as the United States itself. No less an authority than Russian Admiral Gorshkov has said that this could be so: "Naval forces can be used - in peace time - to put pressure on enemies, as a type of military demonstration, as a threat to



interrupting sea communications, and as a hindrance to ocean commerce".

The only adequate response to a direct Russian Challenge is an American one. The United States cannot afford not to respond to such a threat in the Pacific. But in both the Atlantic and the Pacific the United States seeks the cooperation of its allies.

The future of Southeast Asia will not turn on the interplay of forces between the "power triangle" comprising the Soviet Union, China and the United States. The three powers can be held in balance against each other.

The more important power triangle is that of the United States, Japan and Western Europe (i.e. the European Community and the European members of the Atlantic Alliance). The three of them together constitute the bulk of the world economy, whether it be output, exports or markets. Their economic strength provides the underpinnings of the Atlantic Alliance and the US-Japan Alliance. This power triangle would be decisive with the three powers acting in concert, both in the fields of economics and security. These three powers can work together to protect the environment for economic growth, in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

The question is whether Europeans are content to see alliances along only two sides of the Western power triangle, with no arrangement along the third side, namely Western Europe-Japan? It is along this side that the important trade routes run and Middle East oil flows.

It is ASEAN that currently provides a link between Southeast Asia and the major countries outside the region which also share the same value system and have the same commitment to free enterprise. This ASEAN has done through its bilateral "dialogues" with Western industrial democracies, namely the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the European Community.

Every June, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers meet in the ASEAN capital of its Chairman-nation with their counterparts from these six dialogue partners. The Belgian Foreign Minister, Mr Leo Tindemans, who participated as EC president in 1982, later described such a meeting as "one of the most constructive international meetings of the year".\* A total of 21 countries, 11 in the Asia-Pacific (the six ASEAN

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\* Mr Tindemans spoke as Chairman of the Centre of European Studies (CEPS) EC-ASEAN discussion group meeting in Brussels on 5 July 1984. Dr Chiang is the co-Chairman.

and the five Pacific) and the 10 EC countries are represented.

In June 1983, the West German Foreign Minister Mr Hans Dietrich Genscher, who had been instrumental in bringing about the first meeting of Foreign Ministers of the EC and ASEAN during his Presidency in November 1978, enlarged the EC's representation at the annual ASEAN meetings by invoking the troika formula of immediate past, present and incoming Presidents of the Council of Ministers. The European Commission is represented by its Vice-President for External Relations (Mr W. Haferkamp).

In the July 1984, ASEAN meeting, ASEAN innovated a separate meeting for an exchange of news on the concept of Pacific Cooperation between ASEAN and the Pacific dialogue partners (United States, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand).

In November 1984, ASEAN Foreign Ministers will meet with their ten EC counterparts and the Vice-President of the European Commission for External Relations for their fifth meeting at Foreign Ministers' level in Dublin.

The outlook for Southeast Asia, with ASEAN playing a positive role, is more than fair. ASEAN has actively sought a greater European involvement in its social and economic development. A more positive European response will be to Europe's own interest as ASEAN provides it with additional links with its American and Japanese partners and others in the rapidly growing Asia-Pacific regions of which ASEAN is the core.

### Summary

In the present paper first reference is made to the situation in Southeast Asia in 1971 and in 1975. After analyzing, secondly, the position of the three Powers - the United States, the Soviet Union and China - in 1979, following the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, finally an attempt is made, to prognosticate the prospects for Southeast Asia.