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South East Asia — a Factor in World Politics

Nicholas Roosevelt, the American publicist, in 1928 used a strikingly succinct formula to describe the world-historic situation in its essentials: "What the Mediterranean was to the civilisation of Rome, and the Atlantic was to Europe in the last three centuries," he wrote, "the Pacific is to the world of the twentieth century." For the author of "The Restless Pacific" it was "the outstanding fact of the twentieth century that the theatre of world events has shifted from the Atlantic to the Pacific." And indeed, in the last five decades changes have taken place and developments been set in motion which go a long way to justify this view. The world powers of our day are Pacific powers. Taking a global view, the balance of power depends decisively on the interplay of forces in the large Pacific region. The outcome however is not decided by the "great" powers alone; the nations of South East Asia, as well as Australia and New Zealand, are playing a part.

Having broken away from colonial domination in the twentieth century, they have the will to determine their own fate — not only in "domestic affairs" but as regards their position in "inter-regional" and "international affairs". Their vigilance and sensitivity are adjuncts of their will not to become the objects of a new imperialism of whatever variety or ideology. To this end they must be actors on the contemporary stage. Given the existing rivalries in world politics and the importance of the Pacific, the question is whether and in what form the South East Asian region is predestined for the formation of alliances. Are the first moves being made towards

a common policy in South East Asia? Where are there opportunities for large-area cooperation, and where its limits?

The history of the last 150 years shows clearly in what great measure South East Asia has been a region of world-political significance. When Sir Stamford Raffles recognised the potential of Singapore for British trade and in 1819 made the first moves to take possession of a strip of land which in his day was only a mangrove swamp, he saw in his mind's eye the future transshipment and free port which would be "open to ships and vessels of every nation free of duty, equally and alike to all". He also — as Roosevelt has stressed — appreciated its strategic-political situation. He wrote to a friend: "It gives us the command of China and Japan, with Siam and Cambodia, to say nothing of the islands (i.e., Indonesia and the Philippines) themselves." Singapore attained a key position and is still keeping it today! From a western point of view the Strait of Malacca is the narrow gate to the Pacific; for a world power in the East — as Japan's conduct of the war proved in 1941/42 — it holds the key to the control from Singapore of two major regions, the Pacific and the Indian one.

Sir Stamford Raffles' words could — with reverse signs — have been the strategic concept of the Japanese: Follow up the capture of Singapore with the affiliation of Thailand as an "ally", the conquest of the Philippines and the occupation of the Indonesian islands, giving control over Indochina and the Chinese coasts. The rise and collapse of the Japanese empire, the defeat and withdrawal of the

colonial powers, and finally the doomed efforts to resurrect them have given an impetus to the process of decolonisation in South East Asia to which most states in this region owe their origin. Having gained their independence, they were immediately drawn into the great conflicts, involved in the issues known as "Korea" and "Vietnam", and in part also received into the political systems of which the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) is an example. This "continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid" pact concluded in September, 1954, by Australia, New Zealand, France, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the USA and the UK was joined by Malaysia in 1957. "In the lee of SEATO as it were" (to use Oskar Weggel's phrase in "China Aktuell") the Association of South East Asia (ASA) was set up by the three anti-communist states — the Philippines, Thailand and Malaya — in 1961 and enlarged by the accession of Singapore and Indonesia in 1967 when it became the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Originally a definitely anti-communist league, the ASEAN has developed into a coalition which steers a course between the great powers and their rivalries — and also between the economic powers — but tends to bring a regional momentum into the Pacific and international system of states.

South East Asia is obviously involved in the Russo-Chinese confrontation. When the British Government announced the military withdrawal from "east of Suez" and started on it, the Soviets openly courted Malaysia. In 1968 Moscow and Kuala Lum-

pur exchanged ambassadors. Significantly — as Weggel has pointed out — Moscow stressed that, unlike Peking, it would scrupulously abstain from any interference with Malaysia's domestic affairs. Moscow thereby played the trump card presented by the ethnic-political strains, speculating on fears about the Chinese, whereas Chinese propaganda chose Soviet imperialism as the bogey, warning against the threat of the USSR's aspirations to South East Asia.

In the circumstances it is probably of importance that on an initiative from Kuala Lumpur the ASEAN has presented its own scheme for the neutralisation of South East Asia which is to be guaranteed by the great powers, as against the Soviet concept of a collective security system including South East Asia. The Asian decision to negotiate with the European Community as one group with another must also be regarded both of political and commercial importance. Similarly the ASEAN had repeatedly held talks with Japan as one group.

It would be premature to speak of a political concept of the South East Asian states which would already suggest the existence, side by side with the current approaches to cooperation, of integration factors and might indicate a road leading to a "Union". It would be equally wrong however to interpret the differences which exist between the states as if it were almost impossible for South East Asia ever to form a bloc which could have an impact on the international political scene. There exists a community of interests, although it is unmistakably of a largely defensive character. This community of interests leads on to a common policy with the object of not allowing the region to become the plaything of

world-political rivalries. A realistic assessment of the conditions of power is taking place in the wake of the disideologisation of the political fronts although the importance of "ideology" as a political instrument is unlikely to be underrated. It is important however that South East Asia does not want to become involved in an ideological line-up; its idea of neutrality seems to bear this out.

Defensive is also the purpose of the policy of avoiding exposure to the pressure and preponderance of the economic powers of the Pacific area. The strains in the relations with Japan which showed several times in the last two years in explosive utterances against Japanese economic hegemony — in an especially blunt form during the visit of the Japanese Premier Tanaka to Indonesia — reflect the rejection of any kind of dependence on Japan.

A positive aspect is obviously the wish to present South East Asia as an attractive partner for the Pacific region as well as Europe by merging the separate interests. That balance-of-power considerations, as well as purely commercial and economic objectives are a factor here, cannot be ruled out. The interest in contact with the European Community has no doubt its political aspects. It is important that the overwhelming support for a world-wide trade orientation in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Netherlands suits the South East Asian countries. So does the general desire in Great Britain not only to keep the Commonwealth traditions alive but to give them a new content befitting the changed conditions.

Finally, it is to be recorded as a fact that the South East Asian states have come to realise that in the era of "resources diplo-

macy" the weight of their raw materials can be thrown into the scales. South East Asia occupies a strong position in regard to rubber, tin and copra in particular. Certain proposals for cartel-like commodity agreements have been drawn up by the ASEAN, and producers in other regions may wish to seek an arrangement with South East Asia.

If there is thus a good deal of evidence to suggest that the South East Asian region may form a bloc in the Pacific area and as such become a factor in international politics, it must be said that it will depend on the states concerned themselves, and on how they get on with each other, whether such a bloc will in fact be established. There are still conflicts between Singapore and Malaysia; political disagreements follow from ethnical differences and sometimes also from clashing interests. Competition in trade plays a part. Such economic considerations, to say nothing of the past crises, have often impeded cooperation between Indonesia and Singapore, right up to the present day. What holds good for Japan in some respects also applies to the concern felt in Indonesia about Singapore, namely, that it might achieve a dominant economic stature or extend its influence at the expense of the other countries.

Europe, and that includes the Federal Republic, has a reasonable interest in taking a positive view of regional concentration in South East Asia and assisting it within the possible limits — as far as an outsider can do. Diplomacy — and the diplomacy of economic relations is a part of it — can, properly applied, do much to strengthen the pro-community forces in South East Asia.

Günther Jantzen