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The Paddy Grows in Silence

by Ingo Greve, Hamburg *

In the attempt to build a South East Asian Community, similar experiences will be made as in other cases of merging disparate organisations. There are common interests, but also antagonisms, and a complicated network of interdependence will create a completely novel organism whose character cannot be foretold.

Success or failure of a merger of states cannot be adjudged by what the founders of the new union tell about their moves. In too many cases, their assessments will be "*parti pris*", i.e. biased in favour of their own wishful thinking. The yardstick for alleged achievements is the measure in which proclaimed objectives have been reached, and to what degree future development will be favoured by them. Mergers and associations of states cover a field of activity, previously unknown, in which the participants must make measurable progress in exploration and material development during each succeeding year.

Initial successes reaped by the movement for European union suggested the impression that the process of integration could be accelerated at will. However, the present state of that Union teaches the independent observer that patience must keep a tight rein on high-flown hope. Simply to watch what happens against the linear scale of progressing time often means to ignore profound connections and interdependences. Among the nations that have so far joined ASEAN, abstention from rash action has from of old been acclaimed as a virtue. This is one major reason why ASEAN members will probably not be tempted to take the second step before the first one, on the way to a community of which it is desired that it becomes a closer one gradually. In order to evaluate efforts to build a community in that region, one will be well advised not to overlook both historical and socio-psychological determinants.

Highly Diversified Aims

To date, ASEAN consists of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. It was inaugurated in Bangkok in August 1967, replacing the older ASA (Association of South East Asia) the members of which were Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The new association has been set up to the end of accelerating economic progress and of strengthening stability in South East Asia. For the time being ASEAN is to serve economic and cultural aims.

The Association's agency has been set a list of tasks, which give practical expression to the desired effects, viz.:

☐ to increase the rate of economic growth in the whole region and to raise the level of the region's civilisation through joint efforts in the spirit of equal partnership, so as to create a peacefully burgeoning community of South East Asian states;

☐ to promote peace and stability within the Region through observance of the principles of justice and the rule of law in the relations between member nations and the adherence to the principles of the United Nations' Charter;

☐ to promote active cooperation and mutual support in the fields of economics, social life, civilisation, technology, the structure of society, and administration;

☐ to support member states by means of training, education, and research establishments, in the vocational field, in technology, and administration;

☐ to improve cooperation in the promotion of farming and industry, the spreading of intra-community and overseas trade, including research into the problems of the international commodity trade, also to improve transport and telecommunications on the territories of, and between, member states, and to raise the standards of living of their populations;

☐ to promote joint research projects on South East Asian problems;

☐ to maintain and extend close and fruitful co-operation with existing international and regional associations and organisations serving similar aims and objectives, and to explore all possibilities of closer cooperation with them.

The long list of aims enumerated refers mainly to the creation of tools for making the region advance on the path to a modern economy. But looking at the first of the named aims, so-to-say,

* East Asia Association.

from the point of view of what it is intended to replace, a kind of template or mould appears mirroring past realities, in which present members of the community were living side-by-side, without taking much notice of each other, or in active hostility. In past ages, the aims of economic growth and social progress had been neglected. In the present, they are dependent on each other, mainly because the local populations and their needs are growing and because social mobility is increasing. The aim of building an equal partnership presupposes, on the other hand, that present association members in the past had neither been equal nor partners, as it would have been desirable.

Past Conflict Situations

The proclamation of this aim points to past conflict situations among ASEAN members: the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia, which has died down only a few years ago, was an eloquent witness to this fact. The South East Asian region has, moreover, been devastated by wars that have lasted for more than a generation. Inherited wealth was destroyed, scarcities — compared with the peaceful advance of other nations — are rife, and this motivates the longing for a peacefully blooming community of South East Asian states. Underlining the principles of the United Nations' Charter means that local efforts are to be seen deliberately in an international context, and the same aim is to be served by the emphasis on cooperation with other international organisations pursuing similar aims.

The region's nations are LDCs which are determined to master their political and economic destiny through combining their separate forces, unhampered by the interests and conflicts of outside powers. In the past, South East Asia had too frequently been affected by fast and abrupt political changes and by politics aiming at confrontation. Such conflicts, based on hostile ideologies and power clashes, have not yet ceased in Vietnam, in the Khmer Republic (Cambodia), Laos, etc.

The nations of the South East Asian region, including those of ASEAN, have not yet lost their habit of mutual distrust. It will not be easy to overcome this obstacle. A major step forward would be achieved by the nations concerned agreeing to make a start from a mutually agreed basis, from which they could take off for more commonness tackling jointly-seen realities.

ASEAN is being built round a framework of basic agencies:

☐ the *Ministerial Conference*, formed by the foreign ministers of member countries, which holds regular annual meetings;

☐ the *Standing Committee*, which is being convened several times during the year;

☐ the *Permanent Committees* as specialist agencies, divided by subjects of deliberation, which form the "ground floor" in the organisational edifice.

Because of divergent national interests, it may and does happen that several specialist committees are established, devoting themselves by similar or identical tasks which possibly could be followed with greater effectiveness by a single committee. Thus, for example, there is a committee on communications and air transport sitting in Manila, and another one for civil aeronautics resident in Bangkok, a third one for transport and telecommunications, again in Manila, and a permanent commission on ocean shipping located in Jakarta.

"ABC" (the ASEAN Brussels Committee) has been set up to keep in close contact with the European Community. Its task is to furnish a basis for the two communities talking and negotiating on questions of mutual interest and importance on a single platform, with a single voice each.

Different Views

It is, of course, naive to measure the success of any agency or committee by the number of recommendations adopted by the wider community, because such assessments do not distinguish between quality and/or relative importance of official acts. Nevertheless, the impression cannot be gainsaid that the industry of specialised agencies, because of the different views of member governments, often consists of vain attempts just to keep busy. However, constant contacts between member nations and the disputes thrashed out in committee will surely also produce, in time, better mutual understanding and will eventually result in joint initiatives. Such hopes may be based, for example, on the fact that the ASEAN foreign ministers during their 1973 conference in Pattaya, Thailand, came to the agreement that ASEAN needed a permanent secretariat. Up to now, there was only the joint Standing Committee which changed its venue annually from one capital city to another, meeting always under the chairmanship of the host country's foreign minister. It is typical for the mutual relations of member states that they were able to agree on the need for a permanent institutional framework but not on its seat (until May, 1974).

Though joint political policies are not among the aims of ASEAN, joint political declarations and manifestoes have been repeatedly adopted and proclaimed during the few years of its existence.

ASEAN foreign ministers are in consultation with each other, which means that they have achieved a certain degree of informal political integration, which gives the community a clearer profile and enables it to play a definite part on the stage of international politics.

The Problem of Neutrality

In future, ASEAN aims to establish a zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality in South East Asia. It will be decisive for the discussion about the neutrality of that region whether such neutrality will be guaranteed by the three big powers, the USA, the USSR and the People's Republic of China. In discussing neutrality, ASEAN members have split into two different schools of thought. The one of them is in favour of certain big power guarantees, whilst the second one is averse to it, believing that guarantees of this sort offer an easy pretext for big-power interventions in the area. With the two points of view totally opposed to each other, it is unthinkable, for the time being, that a joint decision will be made soon.

ASEAN members, on the other hand, completely agree that, apart from themselves, all the Indo-Chinese states and Burma should be included into the South East Asian zone of peace. That is why changes occurring there are important for ASEAN's future. In theory, even the accession of communist-governed states is not excluded, since ASEAN's charter ignores questions of political ideology.

Economic Cooperation

Several efforts have been staged to practise economic cooperation: there are attempts at joint touristic planning, joint exhibitions and trade fairs were run, and radio and television broadcasting cooperate on joint programmes. Joint trade policies are being promoted within the ASEAN Brussels Committee *vis-à-vis* the European Community. Also during the World Trade Conference, ASEAN countries' delegations have acted in unison.

Almost all ASEAN members suffer from the same shortcomings that are common also to the other countries of South East Asia, viz. shortages of energy supplies, scarcity of rice, and growing rates of inflation. These difficulties are enhanced by weaknesses in the international currency system. A heavy burden is the quick growth of ASEAN countries' population: the numbers of inhabitants of Malaysia and Thailand show annual growth rates of about 3 p.c. Only Singapore, with an annual 1.2 p.c. increase, registers a significantly slower growth. This means that all ASEAN states need more active measures of population

policy, especially the rural areas where birth rates are highest.

Differentials in Relative Affluence

It is generally problematical to draw comparisons of affluence by countries, based on averages, but the following indicators have been proved by experience to reflect existing trends more or less faithfully.

Table

Country	GNP/inhabitants	Order of affluence	Inhabitants per sq. km	Order of population density
Indonesia	0.43	5	0.9	5
Malaysia	2.80	2	0.52	4
Philippines	1.15	4	1.95	2
Singapore	9.40	1	50.0	1
Thailand	1.35	3	1.05	3
ASEAN average	1.00		1.00	

Source: Based on actual returns collected by Ostasiatischer Verein e.V. (East Asia Association), Hamburg, published in its Annual report, 1972/73. Units standardised by taking ASEAN overall averages to be equivalent to 1.

Singapore, a city state, with the highest population density, succeeded in reaping the steepest economic progress in recent years, reflected also by the highest income per head. It is well set to become a modern industrialised area. During recent months, Singapore was no longer able to profit, in the same way as other ASEAN members, from rising commodity prices because the city is almost exclusively dependent on imports. On the other hand, Malaysia greatly benefited from the commodity boom. Newly discovered crude oil reserves opened favourable vistas for the future.

Though the two countries deviate very much from the overall ASEAN average, there are also big differences between the two. In Singapore, per-head income is more than nine times as high as the ASEAN average and more than three times as high as that in Malaysia. A main reason for Singapore's favourable position might be seen in its industrialisation efforts. The other ASEAN members are facing vast tasks in this field, which means that they must operate a policy of deliberate industrialisation aiming at growth and well-balanced economic structures.

Such an overall view, naturally, neglects differentials in income between social classes or groupings within individual countries, though they are also important for economic growth. In all those countries, governments make efforts to level down differentials in income between different groups of the population. Such disparities exist between social, ethnic, and geographical groups. In the case of Malaysia, the government tries hard to make the Malayan population the receptor of greater benefits from income growth, because the

Chinese minority, in the rulers' views, has had a disproportionate share in wealth and income so far. Indonesia, on the other hand, strives to decentralise industry and to deflect it from Java to the other Indonesian islands.

Disappointed Expectations

The economic policy of regional associations aims to increase the whole region's wealth by the exchange of goods, the free travel of persons, goods and capital, and by cooperation. The expectations harboured by ASEAN member states in regard to these aims have so far been disappointed. On November 9, 1973, Dato Mohammad Rahmat, the Malaysian Minister of Finance, described intra-regional trade as disappointing. During 1972/73, only 4 p.c. of total foreign trade of ASEAN countries went to fellow members. It is true that ASEAN economies supply a large part of the world with commodities, but trade among themselves is limited. Similar restrictions hamper free movement of people and goods within the ASEAN area. It is, for example, still profitable to smuggle rubber latex and other specific goods out of Indonesia to Singapore, and Filipinos who are employed in Singapore have great difficulties of red tape surrounding entry and residential permits of Malaysia. Therefore, it is not surprising that ASEAN means next to nothing to a large part of the population, except a legendary name.

But there are not only bureaucratic obstacles blocking the way for free circulation of goods and people. Another major reason for the sluggishness of intra-regional trade is certainly the fact that most of the ASEAN countries produce similar or even identical goods. In fact, their main exports consist of the same raw materials. None of the ASEAN countries, therefore, can boast of a significant comparative superiority over the other member states economically, which makes the exchange of goods uninteresting, except perhaps of foodstuffs and other farm products. Stagnation of intra-regional trade growth can be overcome with advancing industrialisation. But it is also an industrialisation policy which emphasises a deliberate division of labour and/or specialisation that may have the desired effect.

In the attempt to build a South East Asian Community, similar experiences will be made as in other cases of merging disparate organisations. The whole is not simply the sum-total of the constituents. There are common interests, but also antagonisms, and a complicated network of interdependence will create a completely novel organism whose character cannot be foretold like a new colour hue can be pre-calculated from the various primary colours used to make it up.

The Long Way Ahead

The five member countries of ASEAN have also a number of common interests which facilitate their cooperation, e.g. the economic geography of the region, similar political and social systems, an economy geared to a free market, and common or similar national languages and customs. In addition, in spite of big differences in their economic development, they are all LDCs. It is mainly national egoisms which have prevented cooperation from reaping the expected success. Yet, there have also been certain successes which can no longer be scratched from the record.

ASEAN has proved itself as a tool for resolving intra-regional problems: for example, it was possible to overcome the quarrel between Malaysia and the Philippines about Sabah by coordinated efforts of the ASEAN members, which prevented its uncontrolled and undesirable spreading. Informal political consultations of ASEAN foreign ministers have produced a growing measure of political cohesion and joint initiatives in the face of common problems.

The new community will be able to achieve economic consolidation through practising the willingness to compromise; it will be able to create new industries whose worldwide competitiveness is attainable. Small-scale projects could have lasting effects in this field.

The attempt of South East Asian countries to cooperate is the first serious effort in the Third World to work jointly on a regional basis for the sake of common progress in affluence. To achieve this objective needs time.

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