

A Future for the U.S. in Southeast Asia

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Since the fall of Saigon in April, 1975, the United States has been attempting to define a new security role for itself in Southeast Asia. Our ejection from the Indochina peninsula terminated a quarter-century of confused and distorted perceptions of American priorities and interests in the region, so it is natural that it is followed by a period of reevaluation and adjustment. Nevertheless, there has been a clear lack of urgency in defining a new role for ourselves in the area, and the reasons for the delay are not hard to find.

Southeast Asia is not now a major problem area for the United States. The member nations of the non-Communist Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines—are, for the most part, stable and prospering. The conflicts now engaging China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, while carrying the broader threat of Soviet involvement, do not at present directly threaten United States security interests and, by their promise of continued disruption and military drain, they make the Socialist Republic of Vietnam less of a threat to the non-Communist states of the region. American attention is focused therefore on major crisis areas—the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, and Africa. The fact that President Carter has yet to visit Asia after a full three years in office demonstrates what our priorities have been.

The second reason for diminished urgency is the changed position of China. Since 1948 our policy in Asia has had as its fundamental premise the hostility of the People's Republic of China. It was to contain Chinese Communist expansion that we formed SEATO in 1953 and fought wars against the Chinese and their surrogates in Korea and Vietnam. Today, many in the United States see China a virtual ally and a force for stability in Asia. That erstwhile threat has now taken our place as the principal obstacle to Vietnamese ambitions. We have

not fully adjusted our security policy to reflect this new view of China, but China's new posture has weakened one of the main rationales for an American military position in the region.

There is a third but less apparent factor. The previously somewhat passive nations of Southeast Asia are now more active in defining the role they feel the U.S. ought to play in the area. This third factor must be explored more carefully.

From the perspective of the ASEAN states, what should be the security mission of the United States in that part of the world? Senior U.S. civilian and military officials are asking this question of Asian leaders. The replies vary, of course, from capital to capital, but there is a common theme. We are told that an American military presence is a stabilizing influence and that they would like to see us continue to play an active role in the area. These statements seem in complete harmony with our policy pronouncements that we are a Pacific power and intend to keep a military presence in the region. There are, however, a number of other things left unsaid that suggest that we should not take these public statements simply at face value.

The leaders of Southeast Asia do not feel they can repeat in public what they say to us in private. Open advocacy of an American military presence is perhaps too much to expect, considering the relatively recent end of colonial control in the area. Public statements reflect opposition to any great power intervention in the region. The principal exception is Singapore's prime minister, Lee Kwan Yew, but Singapore's position is unique. A tiny city-state of 227 square miles, and therefore the smallest boy in the neighborhood, Singapore would like to have as many big-power monitors on the playground as possible. Nonetheless, Prime Minister Lee carefully preserves his nonaligned credentials and avoids public advocacy of an American military presence. If it were merely politically inexpedient for the leaders of Southeast Asia to favor an American military presence, and they wished in fact to encourage public understanding and support of the concept indirectly, they could do so through press or academic channels, but there has also been no unofficial public advocacy of this kind of strategic role for the United States.

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The changes in our military posture in Southeast Asia since 1975 forced on us by the wishes of our two formal allies, Thailand and the Philippines, provide even more direct evidence that their true attitude is not what they tell us in private conversations. It was clear in the negotiations with Thailand in 1975-76, leading to the closing of our bases there, that the Thais found the American military presence a net security liability. Filipino leaders have long maintained that the bases more endangered than enhanced Philippine security because, they argued, in the event of a major war these installations would be certain to attract Soviet strikes. During the 1975-78 renegotiation of our base agreement, lip service was paid to the concept of mutuality, but it was evident from their demands for substantially increased compensation that the Filipinos placed little value on the security benefits accruing from the bases. They wanted other solatium for the injury to national pride created by their presence. During the Thai and Philippine bases negotiations there were no editorials in other ASEAN capitals and no public statements from other ASEAN leaders suggesting the bases were of larger regional interest.

In all human relationships, and particularly in dealing with Asians, there is always a problem of distinguishing between true intentions and what is said to maintain harmonious interpersonal relations, thus fulfilling the obligations of courtesy as a host or guest. To explore the differences between what the Japanese call *teitamae* (explicit statements) and *honne* (private intentions and beliefs) in the Southeast Asian view of a suitable security role for the United States, it is necessary to examine fundamental differences in perceptions of national security.

National security is perceived by all nations and societies in terms of the forces that appear to threaten national existence and national values. For the United States the range of these dangers is relatively narrow. We confront many serious economic problems and are deeply concerned about access to petroleum. However, within a general framework of interdependence we are strong enough and self-sufficient enough in most vital areas not to see our economic fate as resting in the hands of outside forces. If we face an economic threat, it is primarily of our own making.

Nor do we feel threatened by outside cultural influences. The United States is the source of most of the scientific, technical, and industrial drives transforming human life everywhere. Our popular culture and lifestyles are widely copied. We no longer feel threatened by communism as an ideology. This secular religion has lost its appeal, and if it were not associated with Soviet military power, it would scarcely be a major concern. As far as our cultural values are concerned, we are for good or ill the masters of our own fate.

The only serious threat to our national security, as we normally define this term, is military—the capacity of the Soviet Union to destroy us with thermonuclear weapons and threaten militarily the security of other nations closely allied to us. We therefore tend to define our national security in terms of our military readiness for war.

In Southeast Asia national security is defined more broadly. There it has an important internal, as well as external, dimension. With the exception of Thailand, all of the regional powers are newly independent, with a short history of self-government. Political institutions and consensus have not had time to develop fully, and legitimacy is fragile. Most of the governments of the area are authoritarian, and in many the armed forces play an important political role. The mechanism for a peaceful change of power is not present, and the possibility persists of a *putsch* from within the ruling group. Most of the governments are also challenged by some form of internal insurgency. There is a natural tendency to identify national security with the continuation in power of a person, a party, or a regime, and the more pressing threats to this continuity are seen as internal.

There is also an important economic element to this sense of vulnerability. Southeast Asia is part of the developing world. The regional economies are all dependent on raw materials produced for export—rubber, tin, chrome, palm oil, coconut oil, copra, timber, and, in the case of Indonesia and Malaysia, petroleum. The prices of these commodities tend to fluctuate widely for reasons completely beyond the control of local governments. These fluctuations can touch directly the lives of millions, and the political consequences of a price drop can be immediate and serious. There is also widespread concern that the prices of the manufactured goods which they buy from the developed world are increasing much more rapidly than the prices of the raw materials they sell. All of the governments of the area are severely pressed to create new jobs as the young people from the postwar population explosion come on the labor market each year.

National security for these nations also has an important cultural aspect that we tend to overlook. All the countries of the area (except Burma) seek, even demand, the benefits of economic growth and modernization. At the same time, there is widespread concern about the social, cultural, and religious impact of this process. The physical aspects of modernization—the factories, motor vehicles, communications media, clothing, architecture, hairstyles, as well as its intellectual framework of investigation, skepticism, and agnosticism—seem like a tidal wave undermining religious belief and sweeping away cultural traditions. Particularly in countries where Islam is the principal religion, there is hostility to what are seen as threatening foreign influences. We tend to see this as xenophobia, but it is more complex and deep-seated than mere dislike of foreigners.

There are wide differences in Southeast Asia in the perception of an external threat. For the countries on the mainland there is concern about the eventual intentions of Vietnam. The tiny city-state of Singapore has residual worries about possibly unfriendly successor regimes in Malaysia and Indonesia, and has adopted the “poisoned shrimp” defense strategy—“You may swallow me, but you’ll be sorry you did.” The insular positions of the Philippines and Indonesia tend to reduce a sense of direct external threat, but the Philippines is

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concerned about conflict arising from its claims to the Spratly Islands, and Indonesian defense doctrine has traditionally postulated a threat from China, and more recently a threat from Vietnam, despite the lack of amphibious capabilities in either country. While the countries of the area see the chances of a direct attack from either China or the Soviet Union as extremely remote, China's continued support of Communist insurgent movements in the region, and the Soviet aspirations for leadership of national liberation movements throughout the world, generate fears of covert material assistance to internal dissidents from one or both powers.

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What has been the regional response to this more broadly perceived concept of national security? To meet the internal threat, the idea of "national resilience" has developed. Deriving from the Malay-Indonesian word *tahan* (to resist), this concept asserts that the nations of the area must depend on individual, internal strength to resist insurgency and dissidence. Military strength is not enough. It must be accompanied by honest government, economic development, and social justice. Under such conditions, the popular roots of insurgency will dry up, and as each country develops its own resilience, a collective regional resilience will be created that will discourage external intervention.

Responses to the economic threat to national security have taken a variety of forms. All of the governments seek improvement in the terms of trade, all are interested to varying degrees in commodity stabilization plans, and most are active in Third World associations such as the Group of 77 that are seeking basic changes in the global economic structure. In general, Southeast Asian participation has been moderate and responsible, but Indonesia has been vigorous in asserting the position of the developing world in the North-South dialogue, and President Marcos of the Philippines clearly sees himself as a spokesman for Third World economic aspirations. Malaysia has taken the lead in working for commodity agreements. The ASEAN nations have in this association held talks with Japan, the European Economic Community, Australia, Canada, and the United States, seeking assistance for regional projects, and have combined their influence and bargaining powers on economic issues of special interest to them.

In responding to the cultural threat, the governments of the region are whipsawed by the conflicting objectives of economic development and cultural identity. Students sent abroad to acquire technical skills return also

with social and political ideas that the more conservative elements find pernicious. Western teaching methods are adopted so that young people can participate fully in the technical and scientific revolution, but when the students take home the empirical, questioning tenets of the scientific method and apply them to traditional religious teachings, their parents react strongly. As a consequence, there are in many countries fundamentalist, ascetic religious movements that seek to preserve traditional values and resist what is seen as foreign decadence. There are occasional official crackdowns on long hair and "hippie" appearance and behavior. Allegiance to a nationalist ideology is encouraged in Indonesia in *Panca Sila*, and in Malaysia in *Rukun Negara*. *Panca Sila* embodies five principles of the Indonesian state: faith in one God, humanity, nationalism, representative government, and social justice. *Rukun Negara* is a similar Malaysian statement of basic national principles. In addition to economic development, ASEAN has strong social and cultural objectives. The Philippines, the only predominantly Christian country in the region, and culturally the most Westernized, is eagerly seeking an "Asian identity."

Similarly, the response to the external threat is linked also to the concept of national resilience. The experience of the last three decades has persuaded the nations of Southeast Asia that their internal weaknesses and divisions have attracted big-power intervention and rivalry. By developing internal strength, they feel they can create a regional high-pressure area that will discourage outside intervention. This concept was given formal expression in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration signed by the five ASEAN powers in 1971, which set as a common objective a zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality and the eventual removal of all foreign bases from the area. There are inevitable differences among the five on how the zone should be defined and a range of views on when the objectives might reasonably be achieved. Nonetheless, at all ASEAN ministerial and summit meetings since then, adherence to the 1971 Declaration has been strongly affirmed.

There is a related regional movement toward non-alignment. This term out of the 1950's has lost much of its meaning, but as its outline had become blurred, it has attracted adherents and respectability. Indonesia has from the beginning proclaimed an "active and independent" foreign policy, seeing itself under both Sukarno and Suharto as a leader in the nonaligned movement. Malaysia has formally adopted nonalignment, allowed the Five Power Defense pact to wither, and led the way to normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China. Singapore considers itself nonaligned and, while a holdout on normalization with China, is the most hospitable of the ASEAN countries to the USSR. Thailand and the Philippines, for historical reasons, are somewhat more ambivalent, but neither tried to keep SEATO alive, and both have sought observer status at nonaligned gatherings. In other contexts each has stressed its solidarity with the Third World.

Where does the United States figure in this regional perception of the threats

to their national security? In coping with internal dissidence, the evidence of the past two decades has convinced the nations of the area that American military force is not effective and that, if applied, the therapy can be as dangerous as the disease. They have seen how it corrupts a government receiving it, and how the Americans tend gradually to preempt the decisionmaking process and undercut a regime's capacity to govern. They also have seen how a close military association with the United States undermines the government's political legitimacy by giving the insurgent moral ascendancy and enhancing his claim to be the true voice of nationalism. American military power, they are convinced, cannot be applied directly to their internal security problems. Nevertheless, American military technology, like all other aspects of American technology, is eagerly sought. These countries want access to our hardware and the training to operate it effectively, and the governments that have been traditional recipients of American military assistance would like to continue to receive it. This is particularly the case where the armed forces rule or are politically influential.

On the American side, post-Vietnam and post-Cambodia, we too have recognized our limited capacity to intervene successfully in internal political struggles. Therefore, as grant military assistance has declined and been replaced by sales, the political element in the military relationship has been progressively deemphasized. In reporting the acquisition in 1975 of Northrup F-5 jets by the government of Malaysia, the Malaysian press made no mention of their country of origin.

In facing the economic threat, ASEAN nations view the United States with some ambivalence. We are a major trading partner of all of the non-Communist countries of Southeast Asia. Even the Communist states, as they attempt to modernize, repair the damage of war, and feed their burgeoning populations, are attracted by the tremendous gravitational pull of our economy. All nations desperately need access to our markets and seek our technology, capital, and management techniques. At the same time, as the leader of the developed world, we are seen as domineering, exploitative, insufficiently responsive to the needs of the developing world, and reluctant to change a world economic system that in their view is helping to keep the Third World in a perpetual state of penury.

While the U.S. is not regarded as an active threat, our benign image of ourselves and our intentions is not faithfully reflected in the Southeast Asian perception of us. Observers there are made uneasy by the tremendous disparities between our power and wealth and theirs. They see in any close relationship with the United States the potential for undesirable levels of influence and control. Freedom can be as much threatened by the embrace of a powerful friend as by the machinations of a potential enemy. The more prosperous countries, like Malaysia and Singapore, feel this danger less sharply. Nonetheless, Malaysia proclaims a policy of "equidistance" from all of the great powers and is the strongest advocate of the zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality. The Malaysian

foreign minister once remarked to me, when asked if détente among the great powers brought a greater sense of security, that for the mice living on the floor of the elephant's stall, the danger was much the same whether the elephants were fighting or making love. For countries such as Indonesia more dependent upon us for economic development, or for those such as the Philippines with memories of a colonial relationship with us, this fear is more acute. Indonesians have a generally hostile worldview and see *all* of the great powers seeking to take advantage of and dominate Indonesia.

The fears of Southeast Asian statesmen are intensified by what they overhear in our internal foreign policy debate and what we tell the world in our policy statements. We place ourselves in a worldwide struggle with the Soviet Union for power and influence. We proclaim ourselves the leader of the free world, and for many years have sought actively to bind nations to us through mutual defense treaties and economic and military assistance programs. The executive branch, in seeking congressional support for such programs, as well as for military bases, has said that such things give us influence with the recipient and host. President Ford once said that the United States would be justified in intervening covertly in the domestic affairs of other countries if it were in our national interest to do so. Such statements, falling on the attentive ears of Southeast Asian leaders, the targets in the contest for influence, produce suspicion and unease. Our statements to them that we want only their friendship, and that altruism and concern for mutual defense motivate our economic and military assistance programs, are received with understandable skepticism.

A view of the United States as something less than a benign policeman has also been encouraged by what we have done. American presidents, secretaries of state, and assistant secretaries for East Asian affairs come and go with the regular tides of American politics. They tend to believe that history begins when they take office, that what has happened before is past, and that bygone are bygone. Southeast Asian political leaders, on the other hand, are in public life for much longer periods and have longer memories. Suharto has been president of Indonesia since 1966. He participated as a young officer in the campaigns of the late 1950's against Permesta-PRRI rebels armed and supplied by the United States, and he remembers the bombing attacks of an American pilot hired by our government and shot down on a raid against Indonesian Government ships in Ambon harbor. Lee Kwan Yew has been prime minister of Singapore for twenty years. He remembers catching red-handed in 1961 two American agents attempting to penetrate his intelligence service. In 1965, irritated with us on another matter, he revealed this incident in a press conference. The State Department issued a prompt formal denial, only to be caught out again when Lee produced a letter of apology from Dean Rusk. Marcos has been president of the Philippines since 1965, and was a senator and congressman for a decade and a half before that. Carlos Romulo, his foreign secretary, goes back to Franklin Roosevelt and Douglas MacArthur. Both have witnessed American efforts to manipulate covertly polit-

ical developments in the Philippines. Most of these leaders would probably accept today our statements in extenuation that these were the actions of honorable men taken in what was then seen to be, not only our own, but their best interests. Nonetheless, once burned, twice shy.

Southeast Asian leaders told us in private during the Vietnam war that they endorsed our efforts to contain Communist aggression, and said also that it provided vital time for them to develop political and economic strength. At the same time, there was a strong current in non-Communist and anti-Communist circles in the area that saw the struggle in Vietnam as a contest between Asian nationalism and white Western interventionism. The fall of Saigon produced concern about the intentions of the victorious Hanoi regime, but it also produced a not entirely concealed feeling of pleasure and satisfaction that Asian nationalism had prevailed—an echo of the Asian reaction to the defeat of czarist Russia by the Japanese in 1905.

In sum, the nations of Southeast Asia see their national security and the United States in a relationship more complex than the simple military balance-of-power terms in which we usually define it. United States military power cannot be applied to their internal security problems. Our economic resources are vital to their well-being and internal stability, but in this area we are seen as much a threat as an ally. As a cultural force, we endanger many of their values. In meeting the variously perceived external threats, we are regarded as a counterpoise to the remote possibility of Soviet or Chinese direct military intervention, but they would like to make the area no longer a battleground for rivalries between great powers.

A new strategic role for the United States will be shaped to a major degree by the shifting relationships between the United States, China, the Soviet Union, and Japan. It is now, and will continue to be determined also by the regional powers themselves. We should accept and accommodate to their assertion of a regional analogue of the Monroe Doctrine. We recognize that Southeast Asia is economically one of the most rapidly developing areas in the world, and that ASEAN in recent years has had a trade surplus with the United States. We deal with its leaders—tough-minded, sophisticated, confident men who, for the most part, are running stable, strong governments. Yet we still seem to think that we have a regional role independent of their wishes, that we know best what their true security interests are, and that it is up to us to “stabilize the regional power equilibrium.” We see nothing anomalous in a U.S. naval officer with the unqualified title of “commander-in-chief Pacific,” whose area of responsibility extends to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Yet we would find it bizarre if an Indonesian admiral arrived in Sacramento, informed Governor Brown that he was commander-in-chief Eastern Pacific, that California was in his area of responsibility, and that he would like to make a courtesy call and discuss the local maritime security situation.

We have been patronizing also in our belief that the

ruling élites in Southeast Asia would lose their will to govern and seek accommodation with the Soviet Union if they were not confident that the United States would come to their defense. Since the fall of Saigon we have been agonizing about how others see the constancy of our purpose and the reliability of our commitments. If this danger ever existed, it has long since passed. The leaders of Southeast Asia are sophisticated and perceptive observers of the American scene and do not make their judgments solely on the basis of what we say or the texts of our security agreements with them. They are also assessing realistically the whole complex of forces shaping American society today. They know that the leaders of a democracy cannot make unlimited, unqualified promises to come to another nation's defense, and they know there must be in the minds of the American people a living, constantly renewing sense of shared values, interests, and objectives to give substance to such an undertaking. They have made no such unqualified promises to any of their neighbors, and they do not really expect it of us. At the same time, there is no disposition to tilt toward the Soviet Union. The leaders of Southeast Asia, many of them Marxists in their younger days, are also sophisticated observers of Russian communism, and they have long since decided that the Soviet model is unacceptable, that it doesn't work. Soviet military power, while understood and respected, does not at that distance intimidate them; and apart from military technology, the Russians have nothing to offer. Marxism has lost its intellectual respectability. The fellow traveler has disappeared. There are, of course, still revolutionaries, but if they look to Moscow for guns, they no longer look to Moscow for inspiration and leadership. The leaders of Southeast Asia are as aware as we are of the Soviet capacity for subversion and have no intention of letting their guard down.

The United States plays a vital role in the national security of all the nations of the area, but in a way that is much broader and more complex than we have been accustomed to think. Southeast Asian nations are concerned about what they see as a declining American interest in the area, but our assurances that we are a Pacific power and that we intend to maintain a flexible military presence in the region, while welcomed as expressions of continuing interest, are largely unresponsive to their more pressing needs. They welcome the strategic nuclear balance we maintain with the Soviet Union. They would be uneasy in a world in which there was no counterforce to conventional Soviet military strength. But more than this, the nations of Southeast Asia are looking for our leadership in finding solutions to the central issues in the North-South economic dialogue and in meeting the global issues of development, energy, and population control. They need assured access to our markets, technology, capital, and management skills. We must stop thinking about the countries of Southeast Asia as charges to be provided for and protected. They are not pawns over which we compete in the great power rivalry. We must begin to deal with them as countries whose policies toward the United States are as important as our policies toward them in shaping our common future. **WV**