

CHAPTER II

SOUTH EAST ASIAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS
THE CONCEPT OF NEUTRALISATION

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration of 1971 was actually a manifestation of a positive attitude of South East Asian States towards the idea of neutrality. In fact in Asia the idea has been so deep-rooted to as far back as three thousand years ago when Isaiah advised the government of Judah to remain neutral or "sit still" in any war between Egypt and Syria. However, this advice was ignored resulting in the destruction of Judah and the deportation of some 35,000 of its citizens for forced labour in Egypt.

In India, the great political theorist Kantilya wrote:

"Remaining still, staying quiet and remaining indifferent are synonyms of staying quiet. The distinction, however, is when there is only a part of the excellence present, it is remaining still; staying quiet is for attaining one's advancement; non employment of the means is remaining indifferent."¹

The point here is simply that neutrality is no novelty to Asians and may indeed have originated in this continent.

1 R.P. Kangle, The Kantilya Arthashastra, Part II English Translation, University of Bombay, 1963, p. 383.

In the context of contemporary South East Asian history, the idea of neutralising all of South East Asia was first proposed by President De Gaulle in 1964 and initially received favourable response from the states and powers except the United States, which responded with a provocation in the Gulf of Tonkin and escalated the war in Vietnam.

It is useful to study the movements made by each South East Asian countries towards the realisation of a neutral South East Asia.

The Asean Five

(a) Malaysia

Malaysia's current advocacy of her neutralisation policy can be traced directly to at least four factors.²

- (i) disenchantment with the traditional alliance partners and the realisation that all major alliance partners or patterns were independable;
- (ii) a desire to learn from the Vietnam experience and to avoid the mistakes made;
- (iii) the non-existence of a conventional military threat; and
- (iv) the new spirit of self-dependence.

2 Nordin Sopiee, The 'Neutralisation of S.E. Asia, Australian Institute of International Studies, Conference: Asia and the Western Pacific Internal Change and External Influence, Session 2. Paper 5 p. 3.

(1) With the withdrawal of the British from East of Suez in 1971, the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement was abrogated. Malaysia's disillusionment was voiced by Tunku Abdul Rahman, then Malaysia's Prime Minister in his speech at the Commonwealth Prime Minister's conference of 1969,

"Britain has lost the power and the will to exercise the leadership expected of her. There was an apparent feeling of emptiness and insecurity in the hearts and minds of those who had previously looked to Britain for leadership."³

The Five Power Defence Arrangement which superseded the Agreement was purely consultative in nature. And from the beginning the Malaysians have been sceptical about its effectiveness. The Australia-New Zealand-United Kingdom (ANZUK) force is only limited to some 7000 men ashore and afloat. At best it is only a paper umbrella and as early as August 1969, Tunku Abdul Rahman had said that the Arrangement was "useless" as far as Malaysia was concerned.⁴

The other possible defence partner was the United States. But this is ruled out ^{because} of her failure to actively support Malaysia in the critical period of Confrontation and the recent Nixon Doctrine proclaimed in Guam in 1969 confirmed this.

3 Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, December 1960, p. 6.

4 Straits Times, 2 August 1969.

(ii) The Vietnam experience has taught or ought to teach that foreign intervention on behalf of any government, no matter how massive or destructive, can be no substitute for popular backing. Heavy military or economic buttressing of a regime by an outside power "can easily serve to insulate it from political and economic realities and render it insensitive to the social forces with which in the long run it must come to terms if it is to survive on its own."⁵

In relation to Malaysia's neutralisation policy, two other insights have been more influential. First, conflicts will be bigger than they need be when the elephants join mousedears. Further, and more important, where insurgents use and exploit nationalism, outside intervention can be extremely counter protective. The entry of foreign troops on the side of the government in a civil war is the embrace of a fear, seriously sapping its nationalist legitimacy and strengthening that of its enemies.

(iii) Malaysia's policy can be explained thirdly, in terms of different perceptions of future military threats. They will be internal. China of course would like all of South East Asia to be Communist just as the United States would like all to follow its own imagination. But just as the Americans will not resort to

5 George Me. Tkhalin, "The Role of the United States in Southeast Asia in Lau Teik Soon (ed.) New Directions in International Relations of Southeast Asia (Singapore, 1973) p. 77.

invasion, neither will the Chinese. Resistance must come through "national resilience".

(iv) Malaysian leaders believe that their country has this national resilience to withstand subversion and guerilla insurrections. This self-confidence and spirit of "Jayadiri", standing on one's own feet, is a relatively new feature of Malaysian policy. But as early as 1964, at the height of the Confrontation Tun Razak had predicted that our dependence on friendly countries must one day stop.⁶ In anticipation of this, the country had to enlarge its armed forces and has done so.

Malaysia's actual movement towards neutralisation may be traced to the defence debate in her Parliament in 1968. In response to British withdrawal and apprehensions about The Vacuum, and in case an effective defence arrangement could not be substituted, Tun Ismail suggested the time was right for the countries of the region to declare collectively the neutralisation of South East Asia. To be effective, this must be guaranteed by the Big Powers, including Communist China. Tun Ismail also proposed that the countries of the region sign non-aggression treaties with one another. It was also the time, he said, for South East Asian countries to declare a policy of peaceful co-existence, undertaking not to interfere in the internal affairs, of other countries and accepting whatever form of government a

6 Straits Times, 30 October 1964.

country chose to elect or adopt.⁷ Tun Razak referred to these suggestions as "wise, imaginative and far-sighted."⁸ This was followed by his call for endorsement of the neutralisation not only of Indo-China but also the entire region under the guarantee of China, the Soviet Union and the United States at the Lusaka Summit Conference of Non-aligned nations in 1970.

After the signing of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration Malaysia proceeded accordingly. She quickly reversed her policy on the admission of China to the United Nations, exchange diplomatic relations with her and has built complete consensus at home. Her leaders have travelled extensively in South East Asia and outside the region campaigning for neutralisation.

(b) Indonesia

Indonesia was the first country to welcome the Malaysian initiative. In response to it, her foreign minister, Adam Malik stated support for the neutralisation of South East Asia with guarantees from the U.S.A., Russia and China. In Sydney, in September 1970, he said that Indonesia has had the same idea.⁹ Jakarta believed in the beginning that neutralisation was worthy of support as a long term concept. It now appears to believe

7 Malaysia, Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, Vol II No. 22 Vols. 3615-6.

8 Sunday Times, 26 May 1968.

9 Malay Mail, 26 September 1970.

more and more, however, in neutralisation as a workable medium term solution. A great deal will depend on the nature of United States withdrawal from the area as Indonesia, like Singapore, is wary of a vacuum that might be filled by China or the Soviet Union.

(c) Singapore

It is interesting to note that Singapore's Prime Minister in fact proposed neutralisation as early as April 1966. In Sweden to attend a meeting of the Socialist International, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew said: "The best way to maintain peace and security would be to leave South East Asia as a neutral area in which no major powers will use any of the smaller countries as an extension of its own might, and at the same time guarantee the integrity of each of these smaller nations against encroachments by the others."¹⁰ But Singapore's first positive response to Malaysia's advocacy of neutralisation came only in March in 1971 when Mr. Lee described the Malaysian proposals as "the best answer" for the region - provided that the Big Powers agreed to it.¹¹ In July 1972, he told Newsweek: "I would like the United States to maintain a sufficient economic and strategic presence in the area to prevent any other single power, or any group of powers, from gaining complete hegemony over South East Asia. But I don't think you need bases or troops to do that. The Russians don't

¹⁰ Straits Times, 23 April 1966.

¹¹ Sunday Times, (Singapore), 21 March 1971.

have bases and they are extending their influence all right.¹² In a debate over the B.B.C. in December 1972, however, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew stated he would be "most alarmed" if the Americans withdrew militarily from Thailand.¹³ During his January visit to Bangkok, Singapore's Prime Minister expressed doubts that Great Power guarantees could be secured, although he advocated the neutralisation of Indochina. On the occasion of the visit of the Yugoslav Prime Minister in mid-March 1973, Mr. Lee argued that "For the small countries, the question now is not how to avoid being sucked into the warring camps of the two great powers, but how to have their interests taken into consideration when the great powers reach their compromises."¹⁴ An assessment made by Professor Richard Butwell in mid-1972 may still hold today. Singapore's support, he said, was likely to be lukewarm because of the doubts about the feasibility of the idea - in particular, the willingness of men and movements within the area not to seek support abroad; or the likelihood that China in particular will stop aiding pro-Peking dissidents within South East Asian countries.¹⁵ It is difficult, however, to see Singapore marching out of step if all the Asean countries push for neutralisation.

12 Newsweek, 16 July 1972.

13 Straits Times, (Singapore) 3 December 1972.

14 Sunday Times (Singapore), 18 March 1973.

15 Richard Butwell, "The Big Power Question" in Far Eastern Economic Review, July 8, 1972.

(d) Thailand

Thailand's position will depend to a large extent on her relations with the United States. Very soon after the proclamation of the Nixon Doctrine, there was great disillusionment. Thailand was the first Asean country Tun Razak visited to canvass support for neutralisation. The December 1970 joint communique only noted that discussions on neutralisation had taken place. In March 1971, the Thai Prime Minister, Thanom Kittichaorn described the Malaysian proposal as "not very realistic".¹⁶ In mid-November 1971, even while the Thai Foreign Ministry was working on the draft for a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality to be presented in Kuala Lumpur, General Saiyud Kerdphol, Chief of Communist Suppression, stated that enutralisation could not save the country from Communism. Once we become neutral, American aid may drop or even be totally cut.¹⁷ The latest Thai position appears to have been outlined by General Chartchai Chumhaven, the Deputy Foreign Minister. He set out three phases. Firstly, the establishment of "real and stable" peace in South East Asia. Second, withdrawal of foreign bases. Third, a vigorous campaign for neutralisation.¹⁸

16 Straits Times, 25 March 1971.

17 Sunday Mail, 14 November 1971.

18. Straits Times, 1 February 1973.

(e) Philippines

According to Butwell, "the greatest support for the neutralisation proposal may well come from the Philippines".¹⁹ On the eve of the meeting which proclaimed the K.L. Declaration, President Marcos took note that while Malaysian leaders had given neutralisation fresh impetus, "it was first formally proposed by the President of the Commonwealth, Mr. Manuel Queson".²⁰ Earlier, at the July 1971 ASPAC meeting in Manila, President Marcos had urged the Council to study seriously the proposal for the neutralisation of South East Asia.²¹ There are those in the Philippines, however, who are opposed to neutralisation. The Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs may now have changed his mind. But speaking in his personal capacity before a special committee of the 1971 Constitutional Convention, Mr. Jose Ingles stated his opposition to neutralisation on the grounds that one of the obligations of a neutralised state was that it could neither cede nor acquire territory. The Philippines would have to abandon its claim to Sabah.²²

It is evident that the five ASEAN countries mentioned above have formally announced their aspiration for a neutralised South

19 Richard Butwell, "The Big Power Question" in Far Eastern Economic Review, July 8, 1972.

20 Straits Times, 18 November 1971.

21 Straits Times, 15 July 1971.

22 Straits Times, 17 September 1971.

East Asia. In the meeting of Foreign Ministers of Asean which resulted in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration the representatives of the Asean countries agreed that the neutralisation of South East Asia was "a desirable objective" and that they "should explore ways and means of bringing about its realisation" Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand expressed their determination (1) "to exert initially necessary efforts to secure the recognition of, and respect for, South East Asian as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality, free from any form or manner of interference by outside Powers; (2) that South East Asian countries should make concerted efforts to broaden the areas of co-operation which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship. The meeting also agreed to set up a Committee of Senior Officials to work on the nuts and bolts of neutralisation. Indonesia agreed to approach North Vietnam, Thailand to sound Cambodia and South Vietnam, while Malaysia agreed to discuss neutralisation with Burma and Laos.

For the realisation of neutralisation, ~~the~~ the commitment of any single state, no matter how strong, is of course not sufficient. After the full commitment of the Inner Five (the States of ASEAN) to the principles of neutralisation, the adherence of the Outer Five must be gained. Their attitudes now deserve a closer look.

The Outer Five

(a) Burma

The Union of Burma has pursued policies of neutrality almost since it regained its independence in 1948. Burmese diplomacy in the middle ages was certainly predisposed towards "sitting still" in third party conflicts, and there was an old tradition of separateness.

Burma's geographic position is of primary significance. Apart from sharing boundaries with Thailand, Laos and Bangla Desh it also stands in strategic relation to the two great states which have throughout its history exercises great influence in South East Asia, and continue to do so in our time: China and India. At the same time it reaches into peninsula South East Asia and is only divided by a short stretch of sea from Indonesia.

Burma's adoption of neutrality developed from a realisation of the implications of the feasible alternatives. In the early years following independence the Burmese government was the subject of abuse from Soviet sources and their foreign faithful and it tended to be ignored by the United States and British government, preoccupied with the Cold War in Europe. The country had been quite devastated by World War II and in addition to all these problems, suffered from serious communal and political strife. Anything less than neutrality might have aggravated Burmese problems dangerously. In 1956, Maung Maung could state the fact that "Burma's foreign policy is one of positive neutrality."¹

23 Maung Maung, Burma in the Family of Nations, Djambatan, 1957, Amsterdam, p. 146.

He quoted the following definition of this policy, dating from 1952:

- (a) impartial examination of every foreign policy issue on its merits.
- (b) friendly relations with all nations possible.
- (c) acceptance of aid in the creation of a welfare state in Burma provided the aid is freely given and will not derogate from Burma's sovereignty.
- (d) willingness to contribute to building world peace, and to help any nation which might need help.

However, Burma's response to Malaysia's initiative has been lukewarm. Perhaps it is because Burma has always been proud of the fact that she is as she has always insists, the only truly neutral country of the region and as such she is constantly wary of any view scheme which may be construed as possible indirect interference by the great powers.²⁴ At the end of General Ne Win's discussion with Tun Razak on the matter, he expressed that Burma would only take part in the regional plan if the other countries are genuinely neutral.

(b) Laos

Laos announced her official support for neutralisation in

24 See Maung Kyan Thet, Some Burmese Views on the Neutralisation of South East Asia. New Directions in the international of South East Asia., Institute of South East Asian Studies, p. 147.

April of 1971. In fact, Laos has been formally neutralised by the Geneva Agreement of 1962 but this was never fully implemented and there have been numerous violations ever since. The reasons for the failure of the Geneva Agreement should be investigated into and should be of great help to any new neutralisation scheme of the region.

One obvious cause is the fact that the country had failed to develop a viable national government. In fact it is precisely the effect of the hostilities of the various factions in the coalition government that had encouraged these violations by the various external powers,

With the end of the Vietnam War, there will be no more incentives on the part of the major powers to utilise Laotian territory for military operations. It is conceivable that the present conflict between the Pathet Lao and the loyalists will no longer be of imperative interest to the outside powers.

(c) Vietnam

The fall of the Thieu government in early 1975 makes it irrelevant to discuss the developments in South Vietnam's attitude towards neutralisation prior to that date. It should be noted however, that inspite of the blatant rejection made by Thieu to any move for a coalition government in the South, he had on numerous occasions expressed his government's willingness to be friends with any country regardless of their political regimes

regimes.²⁵ But being a government in crisis, surviving only with massive military and economic aid from the United States, his words were mere window dressing to lend respectability to what is practically a puppet government.

It is difficult to speculate on the foreign policy of the new regime in Saigon because of the silence it has maintained ever since being in power. We can only look into the purported policies of the political arm of the People's Revolutionary Government; South Vietnam National Liberation Front when it was in still an insurgent movement and campaigning for world wide support.

In an announcement made by the National Liberation Front in 1962 it declares that "the Front will strive resolutely and persistently for the establishment in South Vietnam of an administration pursuing a policy of independence, and strict and positive neutrality."²⁶ It is followed by a 14-point policy statement advocating neutrality and an obvious declaration that it was not and will not be an extension of any foreign power in the region. Whether this declared will be strictly adhered to remains to be seen.

25 President Thieu's speech at the National Military Academy, 18 December 1970.

26 The South Vietnam Liberation Front's Policy Statement on Independence and Neutrality. Afro-Asian Bulletin, (May-June-July-August) 1962, pp. 55-57.

What is apparent is that the National Liberation Front is heavily indebted to the North in services and in kind in their military campaign to overthrow Thieu. A reasonable conclusion would be that in regards to foreign policy, the People's Revolutionary Government will, at least within the near future, follow the cues from Hanoi.

(d) North Vietnam

After the Vietnam War, it is unlikely that Hanoi will want a strong Russian or Chinese presence in North Vietnam. It was very successful in walking the tightrope of Sino-Soviet hostility throughout the War and has, in the final analysis, exploited this hostility to very advantageous results. Being very nationalistic in nature, right from the war against French colonialism, the North Vietnamese have always maintain a save balance between foreign aid and national sovereignty. They have everything to gain in a neutralised South East Asia where they can devote their resources fully in efforts of national reconstruction after the United States bombings.

As regards to their interest in the South, Nguyen Thanh Le stated in a press conference during the Conference to End the War and Restoring Peace in South Vietnam in Paris that, all they wanted was to establish a true neutrality in the country. As a matter of record, while still deep in the military campaign in the South, the North Vietnamese had already agreed to the neutralisation of South Vietnam. Now that they have a friend in Saigon, Hanoi is

likely to exert pressure to this end. Efforts in reunification of Vietnam will not in any way affect their present attitude to a neutral South East Asia.

(e) Khmer

The aftermath of the Khmer Rouge victory in the Republic of China has not shown any tell-tale signs of who is actually in power in Phnom Penh. The surprise announcement by Sihanouk that he will not head the new government only proves that his leadership in the campaign to oust Lon Nol was only symbolic if not negligible.

However, assuming that in matters of foreign policy his talents would be employed by the new warlords in the governments, it can be safely deduced that his positive attitude to neutrality will prevail. Now that the present conflict in Indo-China has virtually ended, it is unlikely that Khmer will be easily absorbed to the conflicts of others. An independent Khmer, with its neutrality recognised, seems on balance more probable.

Having seen that South East Asians do think positively of neutralisation we shall examine the problems that exist presently, or in the future that may hinder the way to this goal.