

CHAPTER III

INTRA REGIONAL OBSTACLES TO MULTIPLE NEUTRALISATION

Regionalism as a strategy involves the adoption of certain principles by the states concerned, and has as its function the achievement of certain goals. These principles will include the subordination of national sovereignty to the regional unit, the establishment of regional institutions as symbols of solidarity, the exclusion of outside influences; the goals include co-operation in economic, social and political matters for mutual benefit, regional efforts to solve regional problems and collective strength to bargain with and decreased dependence on external powers.¹

Regionalism in South East Asia is still in its infancy. While not intending to go into a deep analysis of the mechanics of South East Asian regionalism in this paper, it is still imperative that certain aspects of regional cooperation be understood as the foundation to any regional neutralisation arrangement. As have been mentioned earlier, the neutralisation of South East Asia as envisaged by the Kuala Lumpur Declaration is a multiple -

¹ Lau Teik Soon, Asean and the Future of Regionalism, New Directions in the International Relations of South East Asia (Singapore 1973), p. 165.

neutralisation scheme where individual South East Asian States collectively declare their neutral status, the effect of which the whole region is neutralised within a common framework. Obviously, its dimensions and its concepts are of a different order from the neutrality of individual states. It poses a great deal of very complex problems and if it is to succeed, they will have to be weighed and fared carefully and thoroughly. The closest example of such cooperation of neutralised states can be found in Europe where Austria, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland have had substantial discussions to broaden and strengthen their neutrality as a single bloc. But these are individually neutral states and there has been no serious suggestion of a regional grouping.

It is evident that for South East Asian regionalism to be the foundation for the neutralisation of the area, it has many flaws. There is still insufficient regional cooperation and solidarity among the South East Asian States. There is still incomplete diplomatic relations between these states and more than the South East leaders want to admit, they still entertain perceptions of intra-regional threats.

(a) Incomplete diplomatic relations

As far as ASEAN states are concerned there have been tremendous progress towards regional cooperation as between themselves. But even as it is, some ASEAN states still do not have diplomatic relations with several South East Asian countries.

For example, only Indonesia and Malaysia have diplomatic relations with North Vietnam. Singapore may be doing so in the near future. But for the Philippines and Thailand this diplomatic task still looks formidable. Philippines was sending advisors to the South until only recently and Thailand has allowed the use of the United States bases in the country in the latter's bombing of both North and South Vietnam.

But it is submitted that with the end of the war in Vietnam and the reduced United States presence in the area, these countries may at least as the first step to regional interaction, establish diplomatic relations with each other.

The new governments in South Vietnam and Khmer Republic have been receptive to ASEAN overtures to the creation of diplomatic relations. But being heavily involved in the reconstruction of their society, these governments may not give top priority to this efforts. But given the conviction that a neutralised South East Asia will contribute greatly to regional stability and thus, national development, these governments will in due time follow this course of diplomacy.

(b) Intra-Regional Threats

In March 1973, General Chartchai *Chartchai* of Thailand expressed his country's desire to have diplomatic relations with Hanoi but in the same breadth he accuses Hanoi of aiding communist insurgents in North Eastern Thailand. He also mentioned the problem the 50,000 Vietnamese refugees in Thailand as an

obstacle to diplomatic relations. This is only one example of intra-regional disputes still unsettled which may be stumbling blocks to a neutralisation scheme.

The Philippine claim to Sabah, though dormant, may erupt anytime when the need arises to exploit such issues as a platform for national unity in the Philippine internal politics. At the same time the Muslim secessionist movement in the Sulu Islands of Southern Philippines has attracted considerable interest on the part of Malaysia and Indonesia. There have even been accusations that Tun Mustapha of Sabah has been secretly arming these secessionists. Whether this is true or otherwise need not be discussed here but the point is, as long as there exist mistrust between these states, regionalism will remain an unattainable ideal.

Thailand too has similar problems in its southern province of Patani and Yala. However, efforts by local Malaysian politicians to exploit the issue has been wisely dampen by the Federal Malaysian government.

Territorial disputes, especially in Indo-China, are far from settled. The borders of Khmer, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam have never really been defined by these states bilaterally. As a result, accusations and counter-accusations of territorial violations are common, more so during the course of Vietnam War. It will be difficult to solve these problems as they have existed since the formation of these states. In the meantime it will be

wise for these states to reserve their judgement on these matters until such time when there is true peace in the region divorced of external interventions, and the matter will be looked into by a regional body of some sort.