

# The BANGKOK EXERCISES: An Appraisal

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UP to this time, there are many who contend that the joint SEATO exercises held recently in Bangkok were a veritable farce. There are those who claim that the exercises were a one-nation show, that of the United States. Others claim that if it served anything at all, it underscored the disunity, the unwillingness to cooperate, and the utter unpreparedness to embark on a truly potent collective defense endeavor of the countries comprising the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty combined. Critics of the SEATO were quick to point out what they termed the "futility" of it all.

I saw the exercises from beginning to end. I had occasion to personally sound out highly placed officials, including a good number who had quite a lot to do with the exercises. It was my good fortune to have been able to talk of them with military observers from the various countries represented there, including one who told me he was "just like any other correspondent," but who, having been duly accredited as

the official representative of the Russian government-controlled TASS, was to my mind an official observer of Moscow. The views expressed by those I came in contact with, either officially or otherwise, and the ideas I developed on my own as one of almost half-a-million observers and participants, I shall consider in writing the analysis I am about to make.

In making this appraisal, however, I do so as a private citizen, and as such, it will not have anything to do with my present position as public information officer of the Department of National Defense. The views I express in this article are strictly my own and do not represent in any way those of either the *Philippines Armed Forces Journal* or of the defense department.

I will attempt to discuss my subject matter by initially pointing out what the exercises accomplished or could have accomplished in the political field, and then treat on the exercises from the tactical point of view.

To use the words of the Thai Gov-

ernment's Director General of Public Information, Lieutenant General M. L. Kharb Kunjara, the Bangkok exercises "were no maneuvers, but simply demonstrations". They were to test, he said, how fast the forces of the SEATO member-nations can come to the aid of Thailand in the event that country was attacked.

More than anything else, the demonstrations proved in no uncertain terms that the countries of Southeast Asia are one in the belief that in collective endeavor lies the strength of their defense. In like manner, they are unanimous in the belief that in regional disunity rests their doom in the hands of a determined aggressor. There can be peace in this part of the world only in direct proportion to the willingness and the eagerness of the countries of Southeast Asia to participate in collective defense activities, and to the possession by the participating coun-

tries of the means with which to help combat any aggressor.

There seems to be no doubt anywhere that the signatories to the SEACDT are co-equally and sincerely willing and eager to participate in collective defense activities. This is notwithstanding the contention of a few that in the non-participation of France and Pakistan in the Bangkok demonstrations the world can see a certain degree of reluctance at collective enterprise by some SEATO countries. Certain members of the press, apparently without knowledge of the true circumstances, expressed very much concern over this inability of two of the SEATO nations to participate. At a press conference attended by some two hundred and fifty press and radio representatives at D-1, Thai's General Kharb said that the two countries had turned down with utmost regret the Thai Government's invitation to the exercises, but



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that they would send in observers. Both governments had advanced as the reason for their non-participation the short notice given them which, according to them, made actual participation not quite possible.

Visibly concerned, a foreign correspondent at the press conference asked Kharb, "How much time did you give the United States?" "One week", was the reply.

The question and answer after that ran somewhat like this: "How about the Philippines?" "Also one week", Kharb disclosed. "I imagine everybody else was given one week, am I right?" "Yes". "Well, how much time did they think the enemy would give us, anyway, in case he decided to attack?" The audience simply laughed.

I had occasion to speak in private to the same correspondent a few minutes later, and to my surprise, he shared with me the opinion, as certainly all of us did, that the inability of Pakistan and France to render some form of participation short of just sending observers could not have been an indication of any unwillingness on their part to participate. He expressed the view, however, to which I agreed, that of any defense effort of this nature to prosper, each member country must be compelled, by the rules of the organization, to maintain in readiness, either at its own expense or with SEATO funds and materials, specific forces capable of being mobilized at a moment's notice. I knew then that he had in mind what makes tick to SEATO's Atlantic counterpart, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

This brings me to the second as-

pect of the collective defense picture, namely the possession by each country of the means with which to carry out its commitments to the overall group. The line so vulgarly exploited by critics of the SEATO that the Bangkok demonstrations were a one-nation show, that of the United States, is to my mind most irresponsible. It cannot be denied that the show was pre-dominantly American, but that was because, as to means, the United States had easily the best, and other countries participated merely to a degree within their respective means. This difference in capabilities among the SEATO nations were noticeable in the demonstrations. They will be as glaringly obvious in the event of an emergency. These differences in individual capabilities, rather than the extent of the threat to each country's security, must be the principal factor to consider in determining the nature and the amount of contribution of each nation to any SEATO force that might be put up.

Should the SEATO decide on putting up a force to be in constant readiness, it will become necessary to weigh the capabilities of the various countries involved, and expect of each country only as big a force or as much a contribution as will not paralyze that country's economy through burdensome upkeep even before a shooting war comes.

Immediately after the press conference in Bangkok the day before the demonstrations were to start, our group of Filipino press and radio representatives "cornered" General Kharb for an "exclusive interview". Most of the questions asked were in-

tended to clarify the nature, the scope and the purpose of the exercises. Easily one of the most significant of those questions was: "General, does the Thai Government expect Filipino troops to fight in Thailand in the event your country is invaded by an aggressor?" "Yes", Kharb declared emphatically.

Kharb's attitude was typical of the attitude of most every official or observer we spoke to during the exercises. It seemed to be the one important assumption predicating the SEATO effort that an attack by one member nation is in effect an attack on every other member. Those in the know have argued that only with such a doctrine can the collective defense effort be assured of success. If or once this is so, then the legislative action by each member nation necessary for the commitment of troops for overseas duty, including combat, must be obtained well in advance, rather than allow the relatively slow democratic processes to slacken the otherwise speedy and effective delivery and employment of aid to help an embattled member-country.

As a medium for practice and display of teamwork among the various countries, the demonstrations could have served the purpose better were they in the nature of maneuvers, of war games of some sort. There was very little occasion to test teamwork, as the armed forces of the different countries, except in a few numbers of the demonstrations, demonstrated different activities at different times. Rarely were the armed forces of more than one nation involved in a specific demonstration.

The goodwill and new friendships engendered by the exercises were tremendous. Rear Admiral Lester K. Rice, Over-all Commander of Joint Task Force No. 19, shortly after his arrival in Bangkok, declared that in participating in the demonstrations, the countries were each reaping a bountiful harvest in reenergized friendships and goodwill. In the government and people of Thailand, for instance, we Filipinos who were there found a truly congenial and friendly ally. The same could be said of the United States and every other signatory of the SEACDT.

That our own Philippine battalion earned for this country a wealth of goodwill can be gleaned in a message received by AFP Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Jesus Vargas sometime after the demonstrations from Admiral Felix B. Stump, United States Pacific Fleet Commander. The message was as follows: "From what I have heard, I cannot not tell you too strongly how well impressed the observers were with the exemplary showing of your troops. All the Americans who participated in Operations FIRM LINK were proud to be associated with your competent and well-trained men. Their performance and friendliness were splendid examples for all."

Admiral Stump went on further and quoted Captain Paul D. Foley, skipper of the *USS Salisbury Sound*, the U.S. Navy seaplane tender which ferried the troops from Manila to Bangkok. Foley's message, as follows, was all praise for the Filipino troops:

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barked. The troops cooperated throughout the period of 'Operations Firm Link', assisting the ship's company in daily tasks in every way possible. They exhibited real interest, cheerfulness and enthusiasm for the job at hand. Their friendliness and good nature made many new friendships between individuals.

"On Washington's birthday, the ship's company and the embarked Philippine troops joined hands in 'Operation Handclasp' in producing and staging excellent well-balanced variety show on the hangar deck. The cordial relation that existed be-

tween the ship's company and the Filipino troops not only gave further proof and meaning to the tradition of friendship between Americans and Filipinos but also demonstrated that the spirit of cooperation is strong among SEATO peoples."

The Bangkok demonstrations served as a useful training medium for the armed forces of the various countries of Southeast Asia and, were the planning and the choices of which to demonstrate more thorough, could have served likewise to emphasize to the fullest extent than it did, the de-

defense value of the SEATO. No less than Thailand's strong man, Prime Minister P. Pibul Songgram, in his public statement formally opening the show last February 15, recognized the importance of the demonstrations in stressing the value of SEATO as a defense organization. This particular aspect of the purpose of the exercises could have been exploited more.

Among the over two hundred press and radio representatives and the equally numerous military observers was a large group of newsmen and observers from Japan. A Japanese correspondent representing one of the three biggest newspapers in Japan admitted to me that he sees great potentialities in the SEATO as an organization for regional defense. He disclosed that a sizeable fraction of the Japanese people and of the press, his own paper included, would go for Japan joining the SEACDT alliance "if given the chance." We did talk, on my prodding, of Japan's wartime "Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere," and he agreed its difference from the current collective endeavor lay in their scope and manner in which Japan's version was being sought in the early 1940's.

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two weapons carriers, one M-24 tank and one 1 1/2-ton truck with trailer, or their equivalent. The U.S. Air Force C-119 "flying boxcars" were equally handy in transporting from Japan and air-dropping on Don Muang Airport in Bangkok troops and vital military equipment.

The United States' "Honest John" 762mm Rocket and Launcher, one of the most recent additions to U.S. weapons, attracted no little attention. The weapon, it is said, can be used tactically to provide close fire support in ground combat operations. Not a guided missile, the 762mm rocket is a ground-to-ground free flight rocket. It is also said to have considerably more battlefield mobility than conventional artillery, with a range equivalent to that of medium-to-long range artillery.

The value of the Marine helicopter, the MRS-3 Sikorsky, in airlifting not only troops but also supplies and equipment was eloquently demonstrated. The "Choppers" carried ashore on D-Day morning the First Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, as well as all the food and equipment used by the 1300 marines. The troops were shuttled from the *USS Princeton* in the Gulf of Thailand to Don Muang Airport, 80 miles inland.

Whatever critics of the SEATO say, the Bangkok demonstrations proved that the SEATO is no "paper tiger." In it, as intended all along since the signing of the Manila Pact some two years ago, lies the hopes for peace and security of the free peoples of Asia. Bangkok laid the groundwork for more fruitful collective endeavors to come.