

THE ASIAN FORUM

Solving problems the Asian way

When the Philippines first proposed the creation of an Asian Forum, the response it elicited from some Asian and world leaders could hardly be called enthusiastic. Not a few considered it foolhardy, if not an impossible task, to bring together Asian nations with conflicting ideological, political, and economic interests and expect them to find solutions to problems confronting the region.

Unfazed by this initial reaction, President Marcos last month instructed Secretary of Foreign Affairs Carlos P. Romulo to present the proposal anew at the ministerial conference of the five-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Kuala Lumpur. The conference, called to assess the agreement ending the Vietnam war and its implications for Southeast Asia, finally became convinced of the need for a regional forum and gave its nod to the proposal.

Reporting on the Kuala Lumpur meeting, Secretary Romulo said the ASEAN members "recognized the desirability of convening a conference of all Southeast Asian nations to serve as an Asian Forum at an appropriate time in the future." He said the foreign ministers agreed that the Forum was the best venue for achieving Asian solutions to Asian problems.

The ASEAN ministers, representing Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, are scheduled to meet again next month, in Bangkok, to finalize the details of the proposed Forum.

The Forum is envisioned to include not only the five ASEAN members, but other countries in the region as well. Already, invitations have been extended to Burma and South Vietnam, both non-ASEAN members. A big question is whether North Vietnam, the Vietcong, the Khmer rebels and the other protagonists in the Indochinese theater will accept similar invitations. Returning from the Paris peace conference recently, Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik was quoted as saying that the United States and North Vietnam did not



Foreign ministers of Asean nations: unity in diversity

favor an ASEAN plan, taken up in Kuala Lumpur, for a regional committee to coordinate aid for the rehabilitation of Indochina. Mr. Malik declined to speculate, though, on whether Hanoi would attend the proposed Forum, if invited.

Other leaders are nevertheless optimistic that the Forum idea will succeed, considering the spirit of negotiations brought on by the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam.

The idea of an Asian Forum was first broached by President Marcos at a time when world leaders were desperately searching for a solution to the Vietnam war. In the early sixties, then Indonesian President Sukarno also proposed the "musjawarah" (consultation) system of settling local disputes. Such proposals, no doubt, stemmed from a realization that it was better to solve conflicts at the conference table than in the battlefield. And, as the ASEAN meeting in Kuala Lumpur acknowledged, "the peace and stability of the area and their well-being are the primary responsibility of all Southeast Asian countries."

Thus, the Kuala Lumpur meeting proposed that neighboring countries in the region should participate in whatever way possible toward the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. A sub-committee met in Baguio City last month to draft the guidelines for such assistance. While the ASEAN members, as Mr. Malik realistically pointed out, "cannot hope to extend material help to Indochina because of our deficiencies and insufficient resources," the organization as a whole appears determined to extend at least technical aid and similar types of assistance to Indochina.

It seems equally determined to set up the Asian Forum as soon as prac-

ticable. The idea is to establish closer cooperation between countries of the region in the social, economic, and cultural fields. Apart from this objective, the initial Forum may also discuss the possibility of forming a security alliance to fill the vacuum should the US decide to withdraw completely from the area. Other possible topics are the proposal to neutralize the area under big-power guarantees and an invitation to North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma to join the ASEAN.

While the ASEAN ministers were deliberating in Kuala Lumpur, Australia was spearheading a move to change, if not altogether scuttle, the seven-year-old Asian-Pacific Council (ASPAC), composed of Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, South Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand. Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, during a recent visit to Indonesia, was reported to have sounded out President Suharto on a proposal to create a new non-political, non-military organization. There is a possibility that such organization would later be merged with the ASEAN because of a similarity in their objectives.

Regardless of the final outcome, these developments strongly illustrate the fact that Asians are now keenly aware of the need to form a more closely knit organization, both to preserve the peace and achieve economic stability in the region.

Existing alliances, which, rightly or wrongly, have been closely identified with the Western powers, have proved largely unsuccessful in attaining these goals.

It is now widely acknowledged, for instance, that the 18-year-old Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), made up of the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, the

United States, Great Britain, France, and Pakistan has not lived up to expectations. Pakistan, in fact, has formally withdrawn from the alliance. France has reduced its role to that of an observer. And there are indications that Australia and New Zealand may also quit the organization. The reason for its continued existence, along with a plan to transform it into a purely economic alliance, is expected to come up for scrutiny when the SEATO ministers meet this year.

The ASPAC, organized in 1966 mainly for socio-economic purposes, likewise has proved ineffective because the nature of its membership has created suspicion among neutral or pro-Peking countries that it is primarily an anti-communist alliance.

That point was underlined when Malaysia announced its withdrawal from the council last March 12, just before the ASPAC meeting scheduled in Bangkok. "There is no point in belonging to an organization which has done nothing," the Malaysian foreign ministry was reported to have said. An Associated Press report said Malaysian officials also believe that ASPAC "will slowly disintegrate and disappear." For instance, they cited the fact that three members—Australia, Japan, and New Zealand—now have diplomatic relations with China and would probably be wary about attending the ASPAC meetings together with Taiwan. Malaysia itself is expected to establish diplomatic ties with North Vietnam "very soon."

The lessons learned from the experience of the two alliances could prove invaluable to the Asian Forum. And given the prospects of a wider membership and of being truly Asian in character, the Forum might yet succeed where the other regional organizations failed.

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