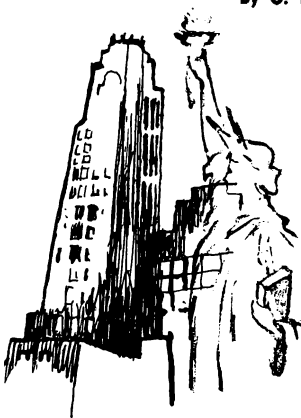


Our Position in Southeast Asia

By O. D. Corpuz



A TILTED CRESCENT, of which the horns are Burma at the northwest, and the western half of New Guinea at the lower southeast, defines what the map-makers call Southeast

Asia. In this sense, the region is made up of nine independent countries: Burma, Thailand, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malay, Indonesia, and the Philippines, with the latter lying about mid-way athwart the imaginary line between the two horns. In addition, some commentators frequently use the term "Southeast Asia" more loosely to include, besides the countries named above, also Pakistan, India, and Ceylon. For convenience, the more comprehensive meaning of the latter usage is used in this discussion.

It has been fashionable for some time now to say that the Philippines belongs to Southeast Asia, by reason of its geography; therefore, it is urged, our foreign policy should be Asian in orientation, both in terms of our rela-

tionships with our neighbors and in our outlook upon the non-Asian world. We all quite widely accept this point of view in principle. However, there are those of our countrymen who are quick to observe that it is one of those nice principles that are customarily forgotten in practice. They maintain that recent as well as present Philippine foreign policies are actually West-oriented rather than Asia-oriented. They further point out the ironical fact, possible perhaps only in the Philippines, that the majority parties avoid the slogan "Asia for the Asians" as if it were some awful and dreaded affliction. Thus, in this Asian country, "Asia for the Asians" is perforce a slogan of the political opposition.

Why the apparent inconsistency between the policy we ought to profess and those which we actually practice? We can begin to understand the problems of Philippine policy in Southeast Asia only by understanding the nature of Southeast Asia itself.

Southeast Asia as an area is rich in manpower; it has some oil and tin, and a great deal of rubber. It is, likewise, one of the three areas in the world that periodically produce disorders or threats to the peace in seemingly calculated fashion—the other two are the Arab Middle East, and the Soviet satellite complex in Eastern Europe. But these



characteristics are not our main concern.

We are interested primarily in the question, whether the dozen countries which we collectively denote as Southeast Asia possess or share enough common characteristics or circumstances, besides geographical proximity, that would justify our treating them as a single whole. This is important for our analysis because, if it turns out that there is no shared sense of identity among those countries, then we cannot say that the Philippines belongs to a community of states known as Southeast Asia. To say so would have little meaning because we cannot belong to a community that exists only in name.

IN FACT, the countries of the area are similar in at least three important respects: (1) Their national economies are all underdeveloped. (2) With the single exception of Thailand, they all share a common history of colonial subjection under western powers. (3) Finally, and almost without exception, the twelve countries are all nationalistic in temper and outlook, and have only recently acquired independent political status. It remains to find out what these similarities really mean.

The underdeveloped economies in Southeast Asia give the different countries, as it were, a common face. The cities, great urban centers are few and far between. The soil and its products are more important, supporting the population and earning the foreign exchange. Production methods and implements are generally labor-consuming, a condition which conceals a great deal of disguised employment. Population pressure bears down heavily on the national product. The economic situation has sociological concomitants. There is a great deal of corruption in politics, and administrative organization and techniques are notoriously inept and patronage-ridden.

The Bandung Conference of 1955, in its final communique, gave primary emphasis to "the urgency of promoting economic

development in the Asian-African region." The participants called for economic cooperation covering a long list of measures and actions. These included: technical aid to one another, the establishment of regional training and research institutes, collective action for stabilizing international commodity prices, trade fairs, exchange of information and samples, and the establishment of regional banks and insurance companies. The Asian-African delegates, nevertheless, stated that: "It is, however, not intended to form a regional bloc."

Needless to say, the cooperative and collective measures called forth at Bandung have not been undertaken, and there is no indication yet that they will be undertaken in the near future. One suspects that the communique as such did not so much express a sense of common interest, as it was an incident in the temporary gathering together of men who wanted to be nice to each other. For the truth is, that economic relationships, to be meaningful, must be expressed in actual trading and exchange. In this respect, the economies of Southeast Asia, all primarily agricultural and raw material exporting, do not complement each other. There is very little intra-regional trade. It must be recalled that production, practices, consumption behaviors, industrial re-

quirements, and trading patterns and outlets were established during the period of each country's dependency under the West, during which time the dominant country and its economic needs occupied the preferred and pre-eminent position. These last-named factors, inasmuch as they have been institutionalized, will persist for a long, long time. Furthermore, it will be noted that two of the critical needs of underdeveloped economies are capital assistance and technical aid, and the countries of Southeast Asia are competitors and rivals, rather than mutual cooperators, in these respects.

IN THE SUM, the fact that the countries of the area are all in a stage of economic underdevelopment has endowed them with similar problems, but that in itself has not proved to be a sufficient force for welding the various countries into the semblance of an economic community.

The shared history of colonial subjection which the Southeast Asian countries (except Thailand) have undergone under the domination of western powers has bequeathed a common memory and attitude to the former dependencies. This is most evident in their readiness to sponsor declarations against the continuation or resumption, in any

form, of western imperialism. The Philippines, indeed, has consistently sided with its neighbor countries in this respect, to the extent, we are officially reminded, of occasionally being on opposite sides with the United States.

So far as it goes, the common anti-western imperialism of the SEA countries is an unassailable fact. But it would not do to overburden it, by inferring from it that it makes the countries of the area into a solid regional bloc. An attitude against imperialism in the past does not itself create common objectives for constructive action or behavior in the present and future. As has been pointed out, no collective action in the form of concrete measures for economic cooperation and development have been undertaken by the SEA countries towards meeting the declared intentions of the Bandung meeting. One of the most obvious facts of Philippine foreign relations is the fundamental difference in the way we and our SEA neighbors look at problems of regional security, diplomacy and trade with Red China, foreign aid, American military assistance, Soviet Russia, and other issues of similar import.

It appears clear that the colonial experience of the Southeast Asian peoples has not up to the present provided a basis for com-

mon objectives and common action. The main reason for this is the nature of the colonial experience. During the period of dependency, the countries of South-east Asia were colonies of *different* western powers. Burma, Ceylon, India, Pakistan, and Malaya were dependencies of the United Kingdom; Indo-China, of France; Indonesia, of The Netherlands; and the Philippines, of the United States. What happened then was that the dependencies were practically isolated from each other, and their contacts with the outside world and the outside influences upon them, were limited to those of the corresponding western power.

In each case, the decisive influence upon the dependency came from the culture, institutions, and decisions of the dominant country. This is the explanation for the fact that today the political system in each of the former colonies reflects in varying degrees of faithfulness to form and spirit the political institutions and practices of the former political master. In the Philippines, our political vocabulary, electoral practices, system of party government, doctrines on constitutionalism, and theories of administrative organization were evolved from American principle, practice, and prescription exported to a Filipino situation. The same holds true with equal validity for each

of the other SEA countries.

But the impact of the colonial experience went far beyond the merely political sphere. The dominant power also exported its own language, ideas of education and educational administration, currency, industrial products, and other less tangible aspects of its way of life, such as its movies, fashions, and fads, and, to a greater or less extent, its hier-



archy of social values. The impact has proved to be lasting, for, while the formal political connections have been severed, the other influences, which we may sum up in the term "cultural imperialism," continue to influence the life of the once dependent country.

Thus, during the period of dependency, the web of pervasive influence woven by the dominant power over and around the subject country not only tied them

together into a tight and intimate relationship, but also cut off the latter from any significant associations or contacts with other countries. This is the fundamental explanation for the absence of frequent interaction and association among the SEA countries today.

IT ONLY remains now to deal with the nationalistic temper



and the newly independent status of the SEA peoples and states. Like the other two similarities already discussed, the similarities in temper and status of the countries of SEA today are often supposed to give them a common personality. From our point of view, however, they have not made the individual states of SEA region-conscious. The evidence is obvious, and all around us. There is no regional approach to problems which logically require re-

gional study and action, such as subversion, the overseas Chinese and economic underdevelopment. The SEATO, which is the only organized approach to military preparation and defense in the area, has no less than five non-area and non-Asian members (the United States, United Kingdom, New Zealand, France, and Australia), and no more than three Asian members (Thailand, Pakistan, and the Philippines).

New Delhi, Jakarta, Manila, Karachi, and Bangkok do not consult regularly on regional or global policies, and are as likely as not to take different sides of international issues and controversies. Filipino delegates in interstate meetings, moreover, usually find themselves having a choice of separate blocs, depending on the occasion—the American, the Catholic, the Latin, and the Southeast Asian.

THE TRUTH is that a nationalistic temper makes a people inner-directed, rather than regional minded. The masses in each of the countries of the area today are being exhorted more than ever before to look to their national past, to emulate their national heroes, and, in general, to "think for themselves." Nationalism permeates and pervades their respective educational systems, and is being tapped to provide the propulsive psychology for eco-

conomic and social development.

There are variations among the dozen countries in the intensity of their nationalisms. Those whose demands for self-government were satisfied only recently appear to be the more nationalistic, and more inner-directed, than those in which the independence issue had been settled at an earlier time. The existence or absence of a well-established indigenous culture also seems relevant, with those countries being more nationalistic which have ancient and distinctive cultures of their own. Beneath these variations, however, the nationalistic temper is expressed in a self-oriented outlook; it emphasizes the "interests of the nation" over divisive group interests in domestic policies, and over distracting involvements in world and regional politics.

The self-oriented outlook of nationalism is a natural condition for the newly independent states of SEA. The change of political status from dependent colony to sovereign state has in each case required major adjustments and confronted the new state with a series of domestic crises. There is mass poverty and economic underdevelopment in all countries; political corruption, tax evasion, and unassimilated minorities in most; and civil war, subversion, banditry, and serious boundary problems in a few. Each country has had to face these difficulties

practically without appropriate institutions, without enough skilled personnel, without adequate capital, and without strategic material resources. What, then, can be more natural, than that these countries should wish to be left alone, in order to apply their undivided attention and energy to their domestic difficulties? External commitments and relationships become unnecessary abstractions, except when they can be made the means to provide the wherewithal for the solution of domestic problems.

IT HAS been suggested in the foregoing analysis that similarities of colonial history, of economic underdevelopment, and of nationalistic temper have not sufficed to create a Southeast Asian community. It has been shown that similarities among the countries of the area serve to divide, as well as to unite, them. The only bases at present that may underlie a sense of community among the peoples of SEA are geographical proximity and a general, but vague, feeling that they are all Asians. Even the geographical nearness must be qualified. Burma, Vietnam, India, and Pakistan are at least as close to Red China, Central Asia, and to West Asia as they are to their SEA neighbors.

But geography and the Asian feeling are merely predisposing

factors; they have not produced community interaction. Compared to other distinct regions in world politics, the SEA states do not have the doctrinal and military solidarity of the Soviet eastern European satellites, the emotional fervor that excites the Arabs of the Middle East, the cultural homogeneity of Latin-America, or the intense political, economic, and cultural inter-relationships within the NATO arc of Europe and America.

The countries of SEA may be likened, paradoxically, to big-city neighbors whose relationships are intermittent and haphazard. They are too occupied with their private problems to pay sustained attention to each other, and their individual histories have given them habits, institutions, and interests that lead to associations outside of the neighborhood. They are all in Southeast Asia, but they are in a geographical area, and not in a political or economic community.

LET US now inquire how our analysis of SEA as a whole bears upon the problem of Philippine political relations in the area. Actually, some implications are obvious. For instance, it is clearly suggested that we must ascertain whether the conditions requisite for sustained and sympathetic interaction between the Philippines and other SEA coun-

tries exist. These requisites include (a) a mutually shared sense of common interest, reciprocally oriented institutions, complementary economic systems, and adequate information about each other interpreted sympathetically. In addition (b) there must be no commitments outside the area that occupy us so much as to disallow opportunities for engaging ourselves in area activities and affairs. Finally, (c) our own domestic affairs must be in some degree of order. If they are not, either we will be constrained to withdraw from foreign distractions in order to solve our domestic problems, or we enter into relationships with other countries in order to secure aid for solving those problems. In the latter case, the commitments referred to (b) might crystallize.

These requisites apparently do not exist at present. Mutual sentiments and appropriate area institutions are not in evidence. The Philippines itself is committed and bound to relationships with the United States covering a broad area of mutual concern. Because of these conditions, we rely for assistance in coping with our urgent needs not on SEA but on the United States; this reliance reinforces our commitments outside of the area, and orients us away from it. Were we to decide, therefore, on a drastic shift in our foreign policy orientation

from America to Asia, it seems that we would have to maintain a foreign policy from which the necessary conditions do not now exist. The intimacy, strength, and variety of the sentiments, bonds, and chains that tie us tightly to America simply have no counterparts in our relations with our SEA neighbors.

So much for our American orientation. The foreign policy of the Philippines in SEA involves two other aspects, which are not usually considered in popular or partisan discussions. The thoughtful reader, however, will require their consideration, or at least their mention.

THE FIRST is the problem of area leadership, the second involves philosophy and foreign policy. There is an indeterminateness about our position in the hierarchy of influence among the countries of SEA. Our resources constrain us to resign ourselves to a position of less than leadership, but our stature does not allow us to take up the role of a mere follower. This indeterminateness necessarily prevents us from formulating or adopting forthright area policies and straightforward or consistent area relationships. Equally important, it makes it difficult for our neighbors to interpret our declarations and actions without doubt or suspicion.

The task of finding an appro-

priate political role for ourselves in SEA is further complicated by the different types of leadership found in the area. The late Mag-saysay, Nehru, U Nu, and Soekarno represent leader-types that show up our deviation from what seems to be an Asian norm. Leadership in almost every SEA country except the Philippines rests on traditions and institutions which make it possible, if not customary, for the same one man to dominate his country's politics for a long time. In addition, the contemplative nature that seems common to the leaders of other Asians has been conspicuous for its absence in the crop of post-war Filipino leaders. The problem of leadership is important, because a country's voice in foreign affairs is usually that of its national leader.

The second problem requires little elaboration. It is related to the fact that the leading SEA countries aside from the Philippines pursue foreign policies which are rather faithfully and consistently derived from distinct philosophies of humanity and of world politics. These countries are India, Indonesia, Burma, and perhaps Ceylon also. It is perhaps no accident that it is the policies of these countries that are usually regarded as expressing the "true" Asian point of view, with the suggestion that the policies of other countries, including that of

the Philippines, do not do so.

Lacking a distinct philosophical basis, Philippine foreign policy must derive consistency from non-philosophical sources, which happen to be our "special historic ties with the United States." This immediately disqualifies us in the eyes of Asian militants from representing the spirit and viewpoint of Asia. This is another obstacle that the Philippines must overcome in order to develop political rapport, and thereby acquire "status," with its neighbors in SEA.

IT APPEARS now that the road that will take us to Southeast Asia, foreign policy-wise, is not a straight and obstacle-free road. Actually, our reasons for wishing to get on that road are of crucial importance. Essentially, those of us who believe in a Southeast Asia-oriented policy may be divided into: (a) those who believe in that policy because they reject our American orientation; and (b) those who believe that policy because they consciously feel that Philippine interests are

best met by our active involvement in mutual relationships with our neighbors. These two reasons are independent of each other.

This discussion is not an argument for the status quo. It does not assume that the present disunity of Southeast Asia and our ties to the United States are eternal and unchangeable verities. Rather, it is an attempt to explain why rejection of the conditions that underlie our present relationships with the United States cannot by itself bring about and sustain a SEA-oriented policy. While that rejection leads us away from old relationships, it does not *per se* create new ones ready to hand.

This discussion is also a presentation of some important objective conditions necessary to a policy of close and sustained relationships with our SEA neighbors. It is a plea for a return to intellectualism in the analysis of foreign policy. Nothing is more ineffectual than a sentimental approach to the politics of nations, in criticism as well as in conduct.

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So Be It

The parents of a large brood of children deserve a lot of credit; in fact, they can't get along without it.