

## THE RUSSIAN DRIVE IN ASIA

The Soviet Union is gradually stepping up attempts to increase its influence on Southeast Asia, taking advantage of the announced British decision to withdraw from East of Suez by 1971 and scheming to exploit the expected contradicting of American power in the Indochinese peninsula when the war in Vietnam ends.

The British decision to withdraw will, it is believed in Japan, have far-reaching effects on Southeast Asia and the Far East in general. Three points stand out:

The presence of the British troops in Singapore has been an important factor for the United States — as a symbol of the unity of Anglo-American policy rather than for the combat value — valuable though the British contribution was when Malaysia was confronted by Indonesia. The departure of these troops will mean, it is said, a departure from joint policy.

Secondly, removal of British troops from Southeast Asia, except for Hong Kong, is expected to relegate the United Kingdom from the position of a world power to that of a European power, both in name and reality. After the British withdrawal, Japan will be the only Asian nation that can offer security to Southeast Asian countries, either independently or with the assistance of the United States.

Thirdly, it is considered imperative in Japan to a way of neutralizing the entire region of Southeast Asia to avoid a conflict between world powers. It is pointed out that at present it would be difficult to neutralize the area because of feuds among the nations of the region. Therefore, the immediate concern should be to set up a security alliance among the countries of the region, centering on Japan.

Thailand is the most vociferous against withdrawal of western military power from Southeast Asia. Bangkok has even hinted that it might have second thoughts about its anti-Communist stand if the United States negotiates its way out of Southeast Asia. Thailand's Foreign Minister, Thanat Khoman, has expressed fears that "Vietnam will be forsaken" by Washington "in the same way as Laos."

The South Koreans, on the other hand, would like the Pentagon to pull out of Southeast Asia and pull in — including military personnel and facilities at present in Japan — to Seoul.

Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, whose country was most affected by the British decision to withdraw, hinted in London early this year that he would not even mind a Japanese military presence in Singapore.

Although Lee's statement stirred government officials in Japan, the official reaction by Japanese Foreign Ministry officials was a cautious one. They are not unaware of the still dormant anti-Japanese atmosphere in Singapore.

At the same time, Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos also renewed his August 1967 suggestion for an all-Asian military arrangement for the area.

#### *FUTURE MILITARY ALLIANCE*

While no concrete steps have been agreed upon by any two of the nations of the region, it is certain that Japan does not want to be left out of any regional military alliance. Japan is against a military alliance only if it is explicitly directed against Communist China because it would jeopardize Japanese moves to improve relations with Peking to increase trade.

Nevertheless, the fact that the United States — anxious not to stay in Southeast Asia longer than necessary — is urging Japan to build up its military power is regarded in Japan as an indication that Washington wants a future regional military alliance to center on Tokyo.

The American interest in an all-Asian military arrangement is whetted, by Japanese observers, by the impotence of SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). SEA-

TO was meant to defend the Southeast Asian countries from Chinese "aggression." SEATO is partially paralyzed, however, by the lack of cooperation from Paris and Rawalpindi.

But with specific reference to Japan, this question is being asked: If Japan does not want to antagonize Peking, then against whom and for what purpose would the military alliance be directed? According to reports in Tokyo and in the view of some officials, if it comes about it will be aimed at the Soviet Union.

It is believed in Japan that Russia can hope to gain from the stalemate in Vietnam. Well-informed Japanese argue that if America pulls out of continental Southeast Asia, the Soviet Union may step into the vacuum. Any such move would upset Japan's plan to cultivate the Southeast Asian markets for its products, and even more alarmingly, endanger Japan's political stability.

In the light of this, Japan is carefully watching Russia. Moscow has been active in Southeast Asia in the last few months. The Kremlin made

a first move in the region by signing a commercial agreement with Malaysia. This was quickly followed by opening diplomatic relations between Kuala Lumpur and Moscow.

#### PHILIPPINES AND PAKISTAN

Also the Soviet Union is working its way into the officially anti-Communist Philippines. A trade agreement, as a first step, is expected between Manila and Moscow. Russia also maintains cordial relations with Indonesia.

Besides, it is held here, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin's visit to Rawalpindi is another Kremlin step to get closer to Asians. This trip resulted in Russia's agreeing to sell arms to Pakistan and the Pakistan government told the US that it does not want to renew the agreement to lease to the US the Peshawar military base, which was due to expire in 1969.

Some Japanese observers think that these advances are far more significant than they appear on the surface. Of particular significance, they point out, is the simultaneous increase in Russian military activities in Southeast Asia.

As an example of Russia's new drive to gain influence in Asia, it is pointed out that the Soviet Government official publication *Izvestia* has criticized Communist China's Afro-Asian policy, alleging that Peking is a "dangerous instigator."

Another noteworthy fact is that maneuvers of the Soviet navy have increased in Southeast Asia waters in recent months. The number of submarines, belonging to the USSR, sighted in the Pacific waters has increased, according to an American military official in Tokyo.

A Soviet naval commander boasted in *Pravda* that "imperialist nations of the West no longer can boast of their absolute command of the

seas. Today the flags of the Soviet navy are floating in every corner of the world."

Japan feels uneasy over these developments because it sees them as a sign that Moscow is tending to exert its military influence in an area which Japan hopes to control through economic means, thus bringing Japanese and Russian interest into conflict.

The conclusion drawn in Japan is that the best defense against Russia is to form an alliance with Southeast Asian countries so that it would be difficult for the Soviet Union to woo them into the Kremlin orbit separately. — *By Sivapali Wickremasinghe in the Manila Chronicle, Oct., 1968.*